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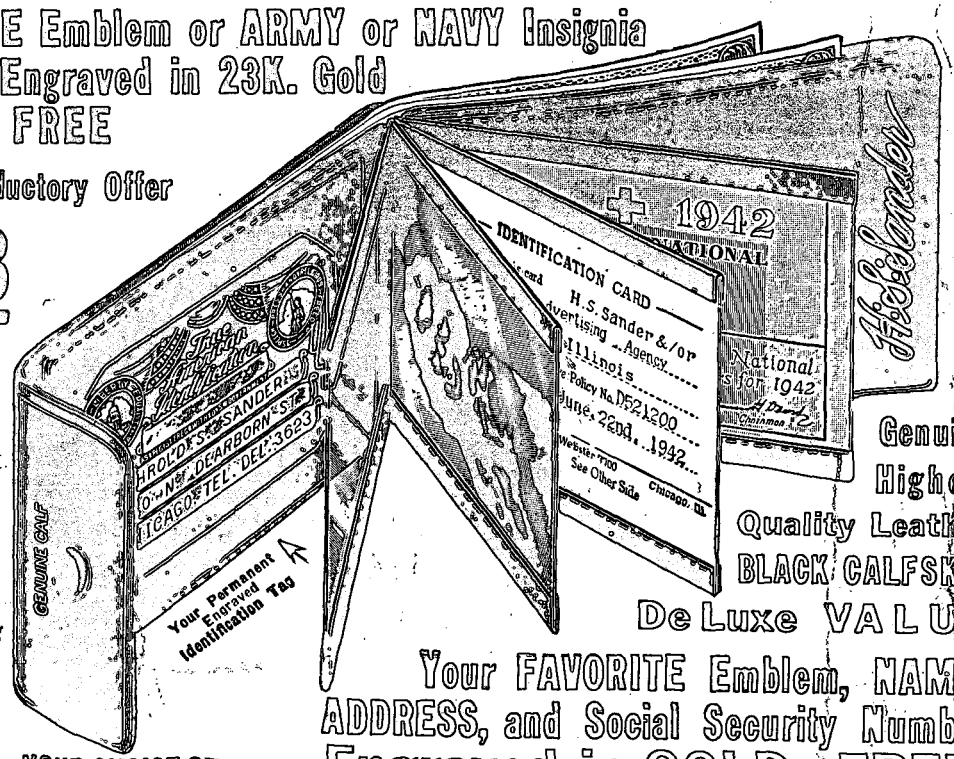

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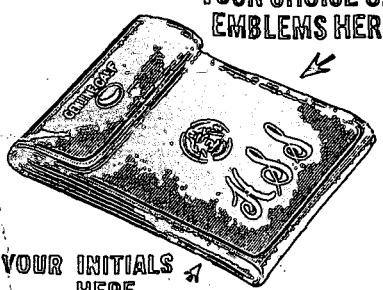

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STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 9, No. 1 — CONTENTS — January, 1943

A Complete Book-Length Scientifiction Novel

WORLD BEYOND THE SKY

By

ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

Cast into the Mysterious Realm of an Outer Universe, Don Strong and His Valiant Band Come to Grips with a Utopian Paradise Befouled by the Mad Ambition of a Ruthless Tyrant! 15

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Cover Painting by Rudolph Belarski—Illustrating "World Beyond the Sky"

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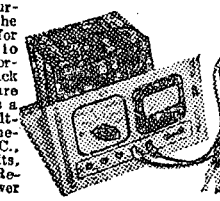

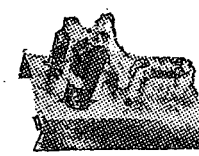

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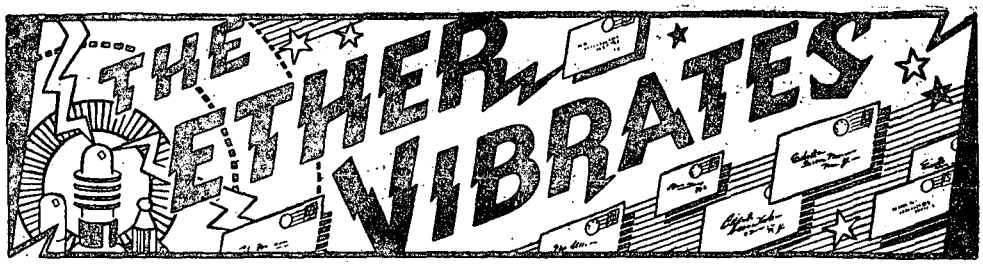

A Department Where Readers, Writers and the Editors Get Together

ABOUT this time of the year something else is vibrating besides the ether and the alarm clock. If you kiwis will examine yourselves closely, you will find it to be your knees and teeth. These snappy mornings certainly make one pound on the radiator pipe for heat, or grab an ax and run to the woodpile. It all depends on the environment. Here in the good ship STARTLING STORIES, the old Sarge just opens the mail and absorbs the "warmth" therein.

Before we stoke the old blast furnace, I'd better take a minute to work out an astrogation for the star trail before us. So you shivering (chattering) pee-lots can see where we are going next voyage.

The complete novel scheduled as chief cargo for next issue is a distinct departure from the usual type of science fiction. SPEAK OF THE DEVIL, by Norman A. Daniels, is a story which is laid on Earth —right now in the present. And is it something!

It makes the old and ponderous yarns about the Devil and the old classics such as FAUST turn green with envy at the modern swing and tempo.

And there is a delicious dash of humor which is woven all the way through the story to add relish.

Nope, the old Sarge isn't going to tell you any more. You'll have to wait until next trip for SPEAK OF THE DEVIL a peach of a fantasy yarn that you will long remember!

The Hall of Fame Classic for next issue will be that clever story by S. C. Carpenter —THE SUPER VELOCITOR, which some of you old-timers will recall. It's certainly worth re-reading. And, of course, there'll be two or three brand new shorts by your favorite authors.

Okay, Wart-ears, uncork the Xeno and pass the steam shovel.

Let's stroke the rocket fuel chamber for this issue!

WELL, what d'you know? The first blast comes from a senior astrogator. Come to attention, you little ogres, a graduate pilot, the author of "City of Glass," one of our recent book-length novels, is answering Kiwi Jacobs.

TO BE CONTINUED

By Noel Loomis

Well, gosh, after what Peelot Jacobs says about CITY OF GLASS, I wouldn't lock horns very hard with him if I could. Holy rockets, am I bewildered! Algebra always baffled me, anyway, and these equations he throws—!!! Remember, Mr. Jacobs, I don't make science; I only write it. I answer as follows:

1. Floyd L. Darrow, explaining Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity in "The New World of Physical Discovery" (page 289), says that energy would drive a mechanism or a physiological process more slowly as mass increases with speed. He uses the watch illustration that I swiped for Hart Niles. As to the formula: I pass.

2. Strangely enough, I can't find a source for the velocity of light—excuse, I just found it. A. A. Michelson established it a few years ago at 186,325 m.p.s. Several before him approximated it. As to its being infinity—I have to pass the buck to Einstein again.

3. I shouldn't have referred to electrons as BEING mass; slip of the typewriter. But that formula: I pass again.

If my writer friends see this, they won't believe it's me. I have the reputation of keeping my rockets hot for any kind of fight, but somehow, after reading the first sentence in the third paragraph of Peelot Jacobs' letter for the 8th time, I feel all mellow and soft, as if maybe I had killed a couple of Xenos straight.

A secret; there **was** something in CITY OF GLASS that I was scared of. Nobody's picked on it yet.

Now to get back to writing IRON MEN, the sequel. Sorry I'm not in a belligerent mood. **—Minneapolis, Minn.**

Well, the old Sarge isn't going to horn in on this discussion at all. I'll just wait until I see that promised sequel. And don't forget, Noel, a promise is a promise.

Comes now an SOS from Canada. Here's a pee-lot who, I'd say, has real trouble.

MY KINGDOM FOR A SPACE SHIP

By John Grant Donnelly

Who ever heard of peaches without cream? That school-girl complexion without Lux? Tarzan without a mate? Or—a science-fiction fan without a science-fiction magazine? Horrors, dear Sarge, Perish that latter thought. It shouldn't happen to a dog. But I'll be dashed if it hasn't happened to me.

I've been reading CAPTAIN FUTURE, STARTLING STORIES and THRILLING WONDER STORIES for quite some time now —up until a year or so after the war had begun.

They were super. They were supermalagorgeous. They were . . . were . . . but what's the use? Words fail me.

With the patience of Ellery Queen I have haunted bookstores till the proprietors began

(Continued on page 8)

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Course Is Bargain. It is beyond belief what benefits I have derived from your course that you sent me at such a bargain. *W. R., Cusick, Washington.

Surprised Friends. People who hear me play don't understand how I do it. They ask if I haven't had lessons from a teacher. To their surprise they find I haven't. I'm glad to be a student of your School. *M. H., Athol, Kans.

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(Continued from page 6)

to regard me as a permanent fixture. But do you think I could find a single T. W. S., CPT. FUTURE or START. STORIES? Even a paint-smeared cover? No, no, a thousand times no!

I screamed. I begged. I put ads in the paper. I promised to conquer the amalgamated galaxies and lay them at the feet of any person who could dig up a science-fiction or even a fantasy mag. like STRANGE STORIES. Any s.f. mag! Imagine, I had sunk that low.

But do you think I could find one? I couldn't.

Can a human being do without food, air, water? Well, dear Sarge, neither can I do without one of your precious mags. And so I plead. Is there any possible way the latest science-fiction or fantasy mags can be procured from that miracle land—America? Or if not the latest, then any fantasy mag?

Do you know of any group or organization or even individuals that could help a fellow fan who is definitely in distress? Perhaps a few dilapidated ones lying around in some lad's den or garage.

Hoping that you can give me some ray of hope. I remain, respectfully yours—**231 O'Connor St., Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.**

And you pee-lots ought to see the type. Kiwi Donnelly used a billing machine to write his letter. It took three full-sized sheets of paper to carry his words! So, if any of you fans think you can help John out, by all means, write him.

I have here a brief and business-like report from the Hoosier State.

STATION MUNCIE REPORTING

By Robert R. Reed

Subject, November STARTLING STORIES. Cover—good. "Day of the Cloud"—4 Xeno jugs. "The Earth Saver"—5 Xeno jugs. "The Ancient Brain"—4 Xeno jugs. "Death Ray"—3 Xeno jugs. I think this issue is the best so far. The blurb for "Death Ray" didn't make sense.—**733 North Elm St., Muncie, Indiana.**

Well, you birds can see what reading digests will do for a fellow's style. Maybe some of you more loquacious pee-lots could do with a blue pencil or two and edit down your copy before you hurl it at the old Sarge's hapless head.

Hold your breaths. Comes now the first blast at the cover.

ALL IS FORGIVEN

By Charles McNutt

Ahhhhh, all is forgiven you. The Nov. ish is really swell. The cover really clicked with me. Yep, the long awaited space scene is here—and done real good, too. As I've said over and over again, "Bergey's good."

Of course it's incidental and trivial that the space ships would have to be as large as a planet or asteroid to be really causing it any harm, but far be it for me to throw cold water.

The stories rate as follows with me:

1. **The Ancient Brain.** Boy, that's the kind of stuff I really like to read. It was superb.
2. **Death Ray.** Gee, that sure was catchy and well written, too.
3. **The Day of the Cloud.** I've always liked Rocklynne even at his worst, and this was really his worst. Now get me straight, I liked it, but it isn't as good as the other stuff he's done, savvy?
4. **The Earth Saver.** The plot—the plot! Gaaaaaaaaa!

Ah, ha! So you've heeded me, eh? Yay, bo, now the Ether Vibrates is readable. It has at least one kick straight to your ego punching it at the same time. I speak of Pee-Lot Brown's communique. Boy, was it swell! That guy ought to try his hand at a story.

The interior art work is dropping lower and lower and lower. The novel's pic was horrid. At first, I thought someone had spilled ink on the ish, but then on further scrutiny I found it to be an illustration. Again I ejaculate, Pfui!

The one for **Death Ray** was the best in the mag, even though it was tiny. Looked like Marchioni's work, was it?

As a whole the ish rates five Xeno jugs and one ten-cent stein. The art gets a persimmon.—**3025 Ainslie Street, Chicago, Illinois.**

That wasn't so bad, after all. I was really looking for brickbats. Yes, Marchioni did the illustration for "Death Ray." I understand the ratings, but the stein and the persimmon baffle me. Perhaps you mean to make some persimmon beer, huh? The old Sarge will stick to Xeno. Next case, please.

PREFERS BOOK-LENGTHS

By Sal Vastola

I started to read STARTLING STORIES with the March, 1942, issue (Tarnished Utopia). This is my first letter to any magazine of any kind. I liked the March SS so much that I have continued reading the magazine. The best story this year was "City of Glass." Let's have some more by Loomis.

I would like to see a story by Kuttner or Binder in the near future.

The only other companion magazine I read is CAPTAIN FUTURE, as I do not go for TWS because I prefer book-length novels.—**35 Clarkson Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.**

Kiwi Vastola—as for Loomis, if you read the first letter in this issue's department you will know that he is hard at work on a sequel to "City of Glass." I note what you say about long stories, but you're really missing some mighty good science-fiction by not reading THRILLING WONDER STORIES.

I have here a year's report on STARTLING STORIES, and in that charming brevity of style, too!

FISCAL YEAR, 1942

By W. J. and Carl Mason

Here is our report on STARTLING STORIES for the year 1942. The best cover was on the November issue, the worst on July issue. We rate the book-length novels as follows:

1. TWO WORLDS TO SAVE.
2. TARNISHED UTOPIA.
3. THE DAY OF THE CLOUD.
4. CITY OF GLASS.
5. BLOOD ON THE SUN.
6. DEVIL'S PLANET.

The best short stories in each issue were:

1. CHRISTMAS ON GANYMEDE (Jan.).
2. HORNETS OF SPACE (Mar.).

(Continued on page 10)

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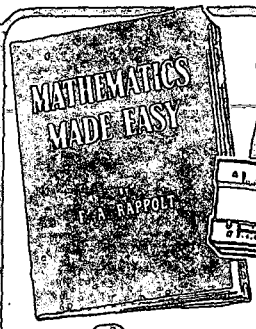

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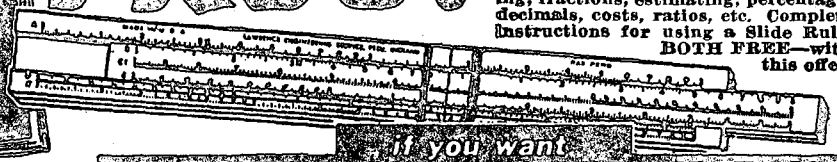

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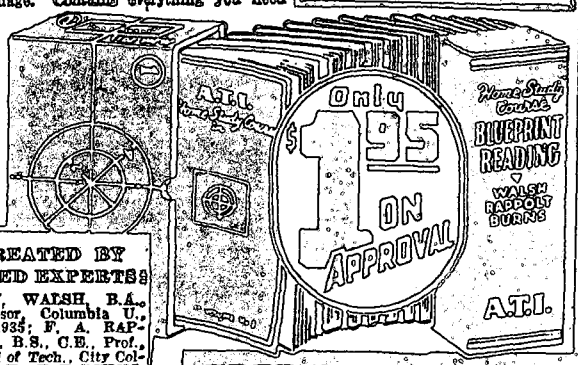

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THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 8)

3. MACROCOSMIC (May).
4. THE MAN IN THE MOON (July).
5. KIDS DON'T KNOW EVERYTHING (Sept.).
6. THE EARTH SAVER (Nov.).

Four Xeno jugs to the magazine in general. —**Franklin, N. C.**

Dear W. J. and Carl Mason: No comment from me. Signed: Sergeant Saturn. Here is what appears to be a mild rave from the Lone Star State.

GOSH TO GOSHI

By John M. Cunningham

Gosh, Sarge, just finished the November issue of STARTLING STORIES. Gosh! That cover was superb-magnificent—gosh! Best of Bergey's I've seen in a long time. Please have him do more like this. For this type of cover has SCIENCE FICTION branded 100% on it.

For the HALL OF FAME, my selection is: PYGMALION'S SPECTACLES, by Stanley G. Weinbaum. In this story the author has woven an intricate pattern of suspense and entertainment. What I was most impressed with in the aspects of this story was the manner of the invention itself. It was spellbinding to the very end. It appeared in the June, 1935 (Vol. 7, No. 1, of WONDER STORIES (Page 28).

For many hours of the best entertainment in reading, I extend to your publications (THRILLING WONDER STORIES and STARTLING STORIES) my ultimate and heartfelt thanks. Please continue to give us, the readers, the same quality of top-notch stories, as you have in the past. Gosh!—**2050 Gilbert St., Beaumont, Texas.**

Kiwi Cunningham, you have the old Sarge all over blushes. Thanks, indeed, for your warm praise. I'm just sorry that we couldn't suit everybody as well as we seem to have suited you during 1942. Well—better luck this year. About "Pygmalion's Spectacles"—we published this Hall of Fame story in May, 1939. Sorry you missed it. But here's a secret—a couple of Stanley Weinbaum's stories are scheduled to appear in the Hall of Fame niche during 1943. Watch for them.

From the confusion Frog-eyes seems to be in, I think we have a bit of insubordination coming up in the next ethergram. All right, he said with a Herculean sigh, let's have it.

THE SARGE IS SILLY

By Bob Parker

Hell-o, Sarge—another issue of STARTLING STORIES, some more of Sarge Saturns baloney, and a highball is the way I start out the day.

(Continued on page 12)

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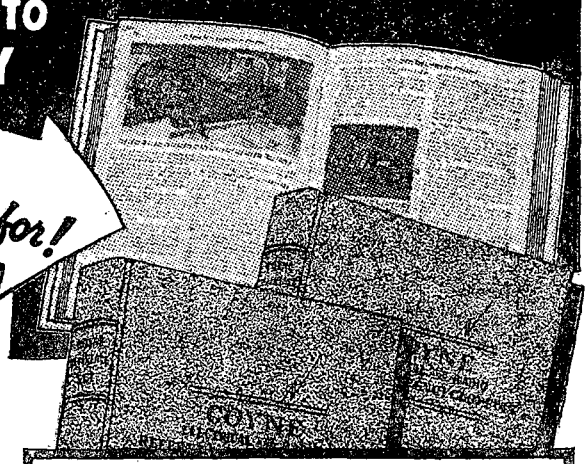

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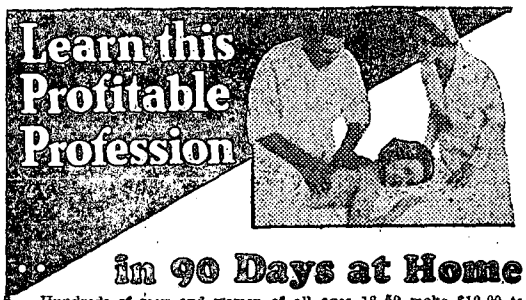

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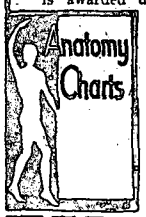

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(Continued from page 10)

As I figured, Rocklynne's story was so-so. It seemed familiar, and then I remembered a short I'd read awhile back about a man that traveled in time to save the world. It was a coincidence, of course, but they sure were alike.

So the Sarge does not like unfavorable comment, eh? Either he does not print it, or he tosses it off with a bunch of words he calls space lingo, that sounds like Neanderthallian mumbo-jumbo. Vic King, who is in the army now by the way, wrote the best letter of the whole mess.

And good old Thornin Yorsid! I looked for his letter this month, but there was none. (Or was there, Sarge?)

So you are now rating stories by Xeno jugs. A novel and new idea? You'll find my ratings at the end of this missle.

Again, Sarge, I'm asking you, why not dispense with that silly junk at the end of each letter, and give an intelligent reply? All real fans agree with me in that idea. Your comments are just plain bunk now, but you could have the best (Yes, the best) department in science-fiction if you'd drop that drivel, about peelots, Xeno jugs, etc.

Now for a surprise to you, Sarge. The cover on this month's STARTLING STORIES was the best on any S.F. mag out this month. I always did like pictures of planets.

In closing, let me say, your best features are the "Hall of Fame" stories, and our Friend's "Thrills in Science." As long as you keep these features, you've got a reader in me.

Oh, yes. In case this is printed, I want to announce that "The Orbit," my fanzine, will soon be ready for publishing, with the lead story by Raymond Washington (Publisher, Sciantifun), well-known crackpot Florida fan. You'll get a copy for review, Sarge, so be patient. November Ratings:

Novel—3 jugs.
Earth Saver—5 jugs.
The Ancient Brain—4 jugs.
Death Ray—4 jugs.
Features—3 jugs.—**Box 139, Stanhope, Iowa.**

You almost stretched that salutation out into profanity, sonny boy. Better watch that, or they'll cut us off the hot air. Now, let's see—intelligent answers—*uummm*. The only questions I can find in your harangue are whether or not the Sarge dislikes unfavorable comment and whether a crackpot by the pseudonym of Thornin Yorsid wrote a diatribe this month. You can answer the first one for yourself. You little beasts ought to know by this time. As for the second question, there was no letter from the thorny guy. The old Sarge

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never suppresses evidence—nor tries to compress hot air.

And, by the way, Pee-lot Parker, you misspelled "missive." You meant m-i-s-s-i-l-e, I presume. Let's blast on.

A NEW DEPARTMENT

By Charles B. Moore

Dearest Mud Slinger, you can crawl out from underneath that pile of fan letters, I'm not going to throw anything at you—yet.

Be it now known that I am writing this missile as I read, or wince at, whichever you prefer, the contents of "our" magazine.

First come the departments. What, you didn't know I read these first? Well now the great secret has been revealed, and don't ask the reason, you might come hunting for me some dark night.

"The Ether Vibrates" is improving at a phenomenal rate, you have actually changed some of your witty little anecdotes, as well as the fact that you are not repeating them eleven or twelve times in each column. More power to you and the farsighted person who sent you in some new remarks.

"Meet the Author" is satisfactory, but that still does not reverse my opinion, it is one of the most unessential articles, for the betterment of the magazine, that you run.

If there is one department that thoroughly agrees with me, it is "Thrills in Science." It is the only feature in the magazine that can do without quite a lot of improving; so, by all means, keep the author "dated up."

In regard to the short stories, all I can say is, I have read worse.

"The Ancient Brain" was, to be short, excellent, in spite of the now old plot. When it first came out, I do not doubt that the general opinion was that a new idea had been introduced in Science Fiction, and that is the only reason it did not get a "nay" from me upon its revival. As I rather hoped it would be reprinted, I will say no more.

"The Death Ray" was enjoyable, only because of the well-written narrative, as the plot was staggering about on its last legs

(Continued on page 116)

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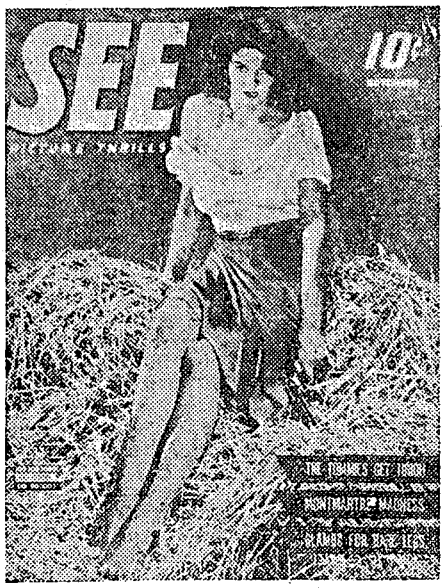

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But Liquor Shopping Is Now a Cinch

by don herold

There are too many labels in the liquor world. I used to be baffled by all those bottles.

Even the best of liquor companies ball you up because each puts a lot of different brand names on his products.

Who makes what? And how good? And how much?

That's why I jumped with glee when I found I could say one name—"Old Mr. Boston"—in any liquor store and be dead sure of catching top-notch quality in almost any type of fine liquor I needed . . . and at a price that wouldn't tear the lining out of my wallet.

I've collected 35 bottles of Old Mr. Boston on my home bar—heart-warming Whiskeys, galorious Gins, brisk Brandies, rollicking Rums and a whole line-up of captivating Cordials and Liqueurs.

And every drop in every Old Mr. Boston bottle sings with that craftsmanship which for over 300 years has been the just pride of Old Boston Town.

You don't have to own a complete Old Mr. Boston home bar, right off, as I do.

Just start off saying "Old Mr. Boston" to your liquor dealer, and let Old Mr. Boston grow on you.

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The distintegrating beam swept in concentric destruction upon the airship (Chap. XIX)

WORLD BEYOND THE SKY

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

Cast into the Mysterious Realm of an Outer Universe, Don Strong and His Valiant Band Come to Grips with a Utopian Paradise Befouled by the Mad Ambition of a Ruthless Tyrant!

CHAPTER I

The Inmate

IT WAS a hangover, this room, from an older day and an older method of treatment. Modern psychiatrists disapproved vigorously of this room and everything in it, pointing out that physical restraint is a poor way to cure mental disorders.

But in a pinch, when all other methods failed and there was an extremely recalcitrant patient who was very much of the athletic type, the room would be used, not with any hope of producing a cure in this manner, but in a desperate effort to save attendants from more broken jaws and bloody noses than were absolutely necessary.

And Don Strong had been recalcitrant. All of Dr. Renault's subtle persuasive powers had been wasted on him. No arguments had moved him. And being definitely of the athletic type, there had been what Dr. Renault would describe as "some slight difficulty."

As a result of this altercation, one attendant found himself the possessor of a beautiful black eye while a second discovered that his nose had been permanently displaced to the

AN AMAZING COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

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The little band of five stared in awe as the devil

right. But in the end, force of numbers had prevailed and Don Strong, still protesting vigorously, had been carried to this room.

He sat there now, glowering, a ruddy-cheeked, husky young man. There was anger on his face. And bewilderment. And a fear so vast and terrible as to be beyond understanding.

His eyes went over the room. There was a light in the ceiling. It was set behind a metal grill. His eyes came down the walls, noting their padded softness. There was a door with a peephole at eye height so the attendant outside could look in. The door was padded. There was only one piece of furniture in the room, a metal bench that served both as a bed and a seat. It was firmly attached to the wall and it was also padded.

The room was a padded cell in a sanitarium for mental patients.

Two hours before Strong had been flung in here. He had seated himself on the bench and had not moved since. His eyes had gone over the room again and again, seeking some avenue that might lead to escape. But this room had been designed to keep its occupant from escaping. There was no window. A ventilator set up against the ceiling supplied fresh air. The only entrance was the door. And under the soft padding was good solid iron.

STRONG'S sole garment was a hospital nightgown. The attendants had stripped him of shoes, socks, necktie, underwear—all of his clothing.

"Confound it," he said mournfully. "If they'd only left me my pants. I would have felt better."

Deprived of his pants, the male of

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-worshiper stepped through the circle (Chap. X)

the species is almost without hope.

"Talkin' to yourself, huh?" said a voice. "That's a bad sign. Wait till I tell the doc about this."

Strong looked up. An eye was observing him through the round opening in the door. The eye was surrounded by a purple ring, which gave it a distinctly hostile appearance.

Strong recognized his own handiwork.

"So it's you," he said. "How does your eye feel?"

"Like the devil," the voice answered.

"You're a sucker for a left jab," Strong said. This was one of the attendants who had put him into this cell. "Look," he continued thoughtfully. "Who's the head man in this nut house? I don't remember his name."

"This ain't no nut house. This is a high-grade sanitarium."

"We won't go into that. Who's the boss here, the big man?"

"You mean Doc Renault?"

"I told you I didn't know his name. He's got a beard like a goat and he talks like his vocal chords were operating in a bath of lubricating oil."

"That's Doc Renault," the attendant said, recognizing the description. "He's the head of this sanitarium. What do you want with him?"

"I want to see him," Strong declared.

"Ain't that nice!" the attendant observed. He made no effort to comply with the implied request but continued staring at the cell's inmate.

"I said I wanted to see him," Strong repeated.

"Sure," the attendant agreed. "I heard you. I suppose you think all I got to do is run up and bring him down, and all he's got to do is to come.

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Sure, you want to see Dr. Renault. So does every other nut in this booby hatch—I mean, every other patient in this high-class sanitarium."

Anger sent a tide of red over Don Strong's face. Anger sent jets of light into his eyes, almost obliterating the fear that lurked there. He started to speak, and caught himself. Losing his temper would gain him nothing. This room was designed to hold men who had lost more than their temper.

If he was to get out of here—and only he knew how desperately important that was—it would have to be through cunning. He got to his feet.

"If you don't bring Dr. Renault down here," he said, "I'm going to start screaming at the top of my voice."

His tone was flippant, casual. He kept it that way, knowing that if he ever let himself be serious, the fear roaming in the back of his mind would rise and overwhelm him.

"If you start screaming, I'll come in and put a strait-jacket on you," the attendant answered. "Then I'll gag you. How will you like that, Mister Guy with the left jab?"

"I wouldn't like it," Strong replied. He tried another tack. "As I recall it, when I arrived here I had a few dollars in my pocket. How would you like a five-spot for bringing Dr. Renault down here?"

"I'd like it," the attendant admitted. "But a fat chance I've got of getting it. Your clothes are locked up, and any dough or valuables you brought in are in the office safe."

"I'll pay you when I get out."

"I have my social security pension to fall back on in my old age," the attendant replied. "I'll be drawing down that pension long before you get out of here, big mouth."

DON STRONG groaned. He was blocked whichever way he turned. The attendant, surly because of the left jab he had stopped, was in no humor to be helpful. And Strong had nothing to offer the man.

Then another thought struck him.

"If you'll bring Dr. Renault down, I'll teach you my left jab," he said. "You look like a handy man with your fists. All you need is a little coaching. What do you say? You bring the doc down here and I'll show you how that left jab works."

"It's a bargain," the man agreed after a reluctant pause.

FIFTEEN minutes later the cell door opened. Dr. Renault entered. He closed and locked the door behind him. Simultaneously an eye appeared at the peephole. Strong knew that the psychiatrist was taking no chances in the room of a dangerous patient. Two guards waited outside, ready to enter in case of need.

"You wanted me?" he questioned.

He was a short, fat man, with a pointed beard and a round, jovial face. There was an oily suavity about him that fairly oozed confidence. Just a look at him was enough to make a person want to start revealing his deepest secrets.

"Yes," said Strong. "I sent for you. I want a straight answer to a straight question. Am I insane?"

The words shot out like hammer blows. Don Strong wanted an answer to that question, wanted it desperately.

And Dr. Renault laughed. Little rippling gusts of sound burst from him. He shook with laughter.

"Why, bless you, my boy, what a question! Of course you're not insane. What ever gave you such a ridiculous idea?"

Strong's face tightened. Confound all psychiatrists, he thought. They would never admit one of their patients was insane—not to the patient. To do so would not be good mental therapeutics. Strong resisted an impulse to strangle this fat doctor.

"All right," he said. "I'm not insane. Then why am I being held here?"

Dr. Renault lost none of his jovial good humor.

"You were brought here for treatment at the request of your father," he said. "I must of course apologize for keeping you in such a place as this room, but you were—ah—slightly on the violent side. We had no other place to put you at the moment.

"But I promise I'll have you out of this room no later than tomorrow.

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How does that sound to you, my boy?" he ended, beaming.

"It sounds to me like hot air," Strong snapped.

Dr. Renault looked hurt at this lack of confidence. Strong clenched his fists.

"If I'm not insane, what the devil is the matter with me?" he demanded.

Dr. Renault pursed his lips and appeared to meditate.

"Our diagnosis is far from complete as yet," he stated. "But you appear to be suffering from a persistent delusion. However, this is very common. All of us suffer from one delusion or another. In your case, it is definitely not insanity in the common meaning of the term, and you can rest assured that under treatment it will clear up promptly. Your father—"

Don Strong exploded. He had been keeping himself under restraint by iron control over his will. Now his control snapped.

"I tell you that man is *not* my father!" he roared.

His voice was so violent that the door of the room was snatched open and the two burly guards outside looked in. At a sign from Dr. Renault, they hastily withdrew.

"Yes, yes," the psychiatrist said soothingly. "Suppose you tell me exactly how you know R. T. Strong is not your father."

"I've already told you that!" the patient snapped.

"I know you have. But suppose you go over it again. Perhaps you may remember something that you have failed to reveal, something that will be helpful in aiding your recovery."

CHAPTER II

Stranger at the Desk

STRONG had spent the last two days mulling over what had happened. He had returned from a month's vacation in northern Maine, a fishing trip, and had walked into his father's office. A man sat there. He had looked up when Don entered.

"Hello, Dad,—" Don had said, and then had stopped.

An electric warning thrill had shot through him. A weird, uncanny chill. The man sitting at the desk was not his father, was assuredly not R. T. Strong, whom the newspapers called the copper king. He didn't even look much like the man Don Strong remembered.

Outwardly there was a close resemblance. The features were the same, the thin graying hair was the same, and it was parted the way his father always parted it. The suit this man was wearing was exactly similar in cloth and cut to a suit Don remembered his father owned.

But—he was not R. T. Strong.

Don knew it the instant he saw the man. How he knew it he was not exactly certain. He knew it before the man spoke. The sunken cheeks, the lusterless eyes, told him. Conceivably, if his father had aged ten years in thirty days—if he had changed from an erect, well-preserved business man of middle age, to a doddering old man on the verge of death—then this man conceivably could have been his father, as far as outward appearances went.

But the change was not only in outward appearance. It went deeper. It looked out of the eyes, lusterless, unthinking. It looked out from the spirit behind the eyes. That was the thing that struck Don most. The spirit behind the eyes was not the spirit of the man whom he had known all his life. It was another spirit, a different spirit.

"Hello, Dad,—" Don had said.

"Who are you?" the answer had been.

The question had seemed to slip out. The man masquerading as his father had tried to cover it up. The fellow seemed to realize that he had said the wrong thing . . .

Don Strong explained all this to the psychiatrist. Dr. Renault listened sympathetically. "What did you do then?" the physician questioned.

"I think I made a fool out of myself," Strong answered. "I couldn't imagine exactly how it had been done, but my single thought was that some-

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one was masquerading as my father. Perhaps a clever actor had made himself up to look like Dad. That was what I thought. I had, at that moment, no interest in any motive that might lie behind this impersonation.

"Perhaps it is extortion. My father is very wealthy, as you may know, and I thought he had been kidnaped and someone was taking his place. Such an impersonation, if successful for only a couple of weeks, would enable a clever person, by taking advantage of my father's power in the metal industry, to clean up a fortune. I thought something like that was going on."

"Yes," the psychiatrist nodded. "That could happen. It would require careful organization and a skilful gang of criminals to carry it out, but it could be done. What did you do next?"

Strong felt a glow of gratitude. Dr. Renault was agreeing with him.

"I apologized, said I had blundered into the wrong office, and got out."

"Then what did you do?"

"I called the police."

"Ah," the psychiatrist murmured.

"I told them my story and took them back to my father's office. If we caught the imposter who had taken his place, we could make him talk and find out what had happened to Dad. I was in a dither for fear the actor would have skipped out, which was why I called the police in such a hurry and insisted they act immediately."

"And had the impersonator fled?"

"No," Strong answered. "He was still there, at the desk. He hadn't tried to run."

"'Arrest that man!' I told the police. 'He's impersonating R. T. Strong.'"

"'But I am R. T. Strong,' he insisted.

"'You are like the devil. Don't you think I know my own father?'"

DON STRONG'S eyes flashed. "I made quite a scene. I was worried as the deuce. Something had happened to Dad, and I wanted to shake the information I needed out of this actor who was impersonating him. To my shocked surprise, he continued to insist he was R. T. Strong. He was bluffing, trying to brazen it out, I thought.

"So we called in the office staff. Of course they knew my father and they knew me. They identified me, all right. I was Don Strong. But they also identified this other man as R. T. Strong!"

"Ah!" the psychiatrist repeated softly.

"I knew darned good and well he wasn't R. T. Strong," Don said. "I thought right away that the whole staff was in on the kidnaping and the impersonation. The police didn't know what to do. Here was a man who said he was R. T. Strong. The staff said he was R. T. Strong, and the staff ought to know. They see him every day.

"He was in R. T. Strong's office, he was wearing R. T. Strong's clothes, and he possessed R. T. Strong's identification cards. But he wasn't R. T. Strong, and I knew it!"

"Then what happened?" the psychiatrist gently questioned.

"Well, the cops were beginning to look down their noses at me. I should have known what was going to happen, and shut up. But I was in pretty deep already; besides, I remembered the slip of the tongue the man had made. He hadn't known me when I first came in. Now he was saying he knew me, and he was looking sadly at me."

"What did you do?"

"I raised Cain! I insisted that we check this man's signature with my father's known signature. To my surprise, he was quite willing. The cops were impartial, but they were looking cock-eyed at me just the same. We made this man write his name, and we got hold of a bank teller to identify the signature."

"What did the teller say?"

"He said that, in his opinion—and he was willing to honor checks on the strength of his opinion—the two signatures were the same and that they were the signatures of R. T. Strong. The bank, of course had a signature of my father in their files. The teller had brought this along, comparing it with the one this imposter had written in our presence

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"Am I insane?" Don Strong asked the suave psychiatrist (Chap. I)

The two signatures were the same!"

"What did you do then?"

"Well, signatures can be faked. The teller could be mistaken. I stuck to my guns. Besides, I had thought of another test, one that couldn't be faked."

"What was that test?" Dr. Renault asked patiently.

"Fingerprints. They can't be faked. I knew my father had filed his prints with the civilian identification section of the F.B.I. fingerprint bureau at Washington. I insisted that the police take the prints of this man who was impersonating my father and check them with the recorded fingerprints of R. T. Strong. They did this."

"With what result?" Dr. Renault said.

There was silence in the padded cell. Strong's face was grim. The psychiatrist's face showed polite interest.

"The prints were the same!" Strong said bitterly.

The psychiatrist blew on his finger nails. He began polishing them smartly on the edge of his white vest. He said nothing.

"There's no doubt about it," Don Strong insisted. "Physically, that man is R. T. Strong. But when I first entered his office, he didn't know me. And he had changed, tremendously, in the month that had passed since I last saw him.

"My father and I have been very close, Dr. Renault. Our relationship has been ideal. He's been a grand dad. But he has changed; and the change

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is mostly in his eyes. They're dead, lusterless. Which brings me to the question I want to ask."

He took a deep breath. "Is it possible for a man to become possessed by another spirit? I mean—well, there are legends. . . In the Bible, even, the spirit of a demon was supposed to have passed from the body of a person into a herd of swine. Do you have records of any such thing in modern times? Could it have happened to my father?"

THE psychiatrist went on polishing his nails. He didn't answer the question. Instead he reverted to the subject originally under discussion.

"You still insist the man in the office is not your father?"

"I know he isn't."

"How do you know it?" Dr. Renault said calmly.

"I can't tell you exactly. The one important thing is that he didn't know me when I first entered the office. Then he pretended to know me. But I think he caught on from the staff that he was supposed to know me so he pretended that he did."

"What happened after the fingerprints were compared? I take it you still insisted this man was not your father."

"What happened?" Strong snorted. "What the devil do you think happened? I said he wasn't R. T. Strong. He said he was. He could prove it. In such circumstances, the only obvious conclusion is that somebody is crazy. That was what the cops concluded. They took me into custody, and the man who was masquerading as my father signed the commitment papers. The next stop was here, in your super-duper sanitarium."

The psychiatrist ignored the sarcasm.

"In spite of the signature, in spite of the fingerprints, you still believe this man is not your father?"

Don Strong fought to get his thoughts into words.

"He's my father, yes, but only in a physical sense. Something has happened to him. Which is exactly the reason I have to get out of here. I have to find out what *has* happened to him!"

Strong had risen to his feet. "And you've got to help me to get out of here! Do you understand? I've got to get out of here at once!"

The psychiatrist rose also. His jovial face was beaming.

"Of course, my boy, of course."

Don Strong's heart leaped at the words. Dr. Renault believed him! At last he had found someone who believed his story. Dr. Renault was going to release him.

"Thanks, Doctor," he gulped. "I can't begin to tell you how much this means to me."

"No need to thank me, my boy," the psychiatrist beamed.

He turned toward the door, waved his hand as a signal toward the attendant watching through the peephole. The door was opened. Dr. Renault, his face alight with jovial good nature, stood on the threshold.

"You can be certain we'll have you out of here, my boy," he said. "We'll have you out of here, as good as new, within six months at the most."

Strong had started to follow the psychiatrist out. It was not until the door was slammed in his face that he realized what had happened.

Dr. Renault had not believed him. The psychiatrist thought he was crazy!

Renault's face appeared at the peephole.

"Just rest easily and don't worry," he said soothingly.

"You go to the devil!" Strong stormed.

The face disappeared.

STRONG sank down on the padded bench. His world was tumbling around his ears. He had thought he was going to be released, so he could help his father. Instead he wasn't going to be released at all. Not for six months at least. And six months might be too late.

Whatever had happened to his father, it was moving speedily to a climax. The only answer was—escape. He had to escape. But how? He was locked in a padded cell.

A face appeared at the peephole.

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Strong looked up. It was the attendant.

"Don't forget you're going to teach me that left jab," the attendant said.

Strong's answer was unprintable. The attendant's face disappeared. Strong sat back down; and as suddenly he sat up. The attendant's reminder had given him an idea. Swiftly he ran over its possibilities in his mind. It might work. It might not.

It *had* to work! He had to get out of here. Swiftly he began tearing his hospital nightgown into strips. This left him without any clothes at all. But that didn't matter, he thought grimly.

CHAPTER III

Man in the Dark

DON STRONG needed plenty of patience to work the end of the rope he had fashioned from the shreds of his nightgown through the iron grill that shielded the ceiling light. He had to be careful, too, that the attendant didn't look through the peephole and catch him. The attendant would call for help and bring in the strait-jacket if he saw what the patient was attempting.

After the fifteenth try, Strong succeeded in getting the end of the rope through the grill shielding the light. He tested it gingerly. Both the rope and the iron grill bore his weight readily enough. Now for the next step.

Standing on the bench, he tied a slip knot in the rope and then slipped the knot around his neck. Sweat popped out all over him as he thought what he was going to do. If he should fail—

He waited. Eventually he heard the pad of the attendant's feet on the floor of the hall outside. After making certain the man was coming in his direction, he stepped off the bench. In spite of the painstaking care with which he did so, the slip knot tightened around his neck with a jolt, that jarred him.

The rough edges of the improvised rope cut into Strong's throat, almost strangling him. Involuntarily his hands went up to the rope. He pulled himself up a little, easing the pressure around his neck. He slid the knot under his chin and tried again. The operation was painful, but he could stand it. And he could breathe.

When he had finished, his arms were limp at his sides and his feet were six inches off the floor.

The attendant looked in through the peephole. He saw a patient who had hanged himself.

In a psychopathic hospital, this was not at all unusual. The patients were always trying to commit suicide, which was one reason why their clothing was taken from them. Too many men have hanged themselves with their belts or neckties for a psycopathic institution to leave such aids to death within reach.

"Hey, you!" the attendant yelped. "You can't do that!"

There was no answer.

The attendant unlocked the door and rushed into the room. Pulling a penknife from his pocket, he reached up and cut the rope.

"So you tried to knock yourself off," he said, in an injured tone which indicated that he considered a suicide attempt a personal insult. "All right for you. You'll get the strait-jacket for this!"

The attendant wasn't woried about the patient being dead. Not enough time had elapsed since he last looked into this cell for its occupant to be beyond an excellent possibility of reviving under medical attention. But he thought the patient was unconscious, and he expected him to crumple to the floor when the rope was cut.

Don Strong fell. But he didn't crumple. He lit on his feet as lithe as a cat. He was swinging as he touched the floor.

"I promised to teach you that left jab," he snapped. "And I always try to keep my promises."

Smack!

The left jab connected solidly with the point of the surprised attendant's chin. Fortunately the wall of this cell was padded. Otherwise the attendant would have been badly bruised from

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the way in which he crashed into it. He slumped to the floor.

Don Strong closed the door, taking care not to close it all the way, in order to prevent the spring catch on the outside from engaging.

WHEN the attendant revived, the man found himself securely trussed up with the rope with which Strong had pretended to hang himself. He also found he was naked. Strong was wearing his clothes, including the white jacket. They didn't fit worth a dime, but they were a lot better than no clothes at all.

"If you'll just open your mouth," Strong said, "I'll slip this little gag into it."

The attendant closed his mouth with a snap.

Strong doubled up his fist.

"I hate to hit a man when he's down," he declared. "But I can't have you whooping and hollering in here before I am well on my way. So will you open your mouth?"

The attendant looked at the fist. He hastily complied.

"That's a good little boy," Strong said, slipping the gag in place. "They'll find you in the morning and let you loose. You'll be none the worse for your experience. In fact, it will probably do you good to spend a night in your own padded cell.

"The only thing I regret," he added, "is that I can't tie that fat tub of lard who runs this joint up with you."

Strong rose to his feet. At the door he paused.

"I helped myself to your keys," he said. "I'll need them getting out of here. I also helped myself to eight dollars and forty cents that I found in your pants pocket. It's just a loan. I'll pay you back some time."

"Ugh-glug-dir-theef!"

Strong had to grin. "I gather you're calling me a thief, pal. If I had time, I'd untie you and we would go into the matter in further detail. But that pleasure will have to be postponed to a later date. Sweet dreams, Toots."

He went out of the padded cell. In fact, he walked out of the hospital just as easily. The attendant's white coat did the trick. Several times he was seen, but he took care that no one got too close a view of him. At a distance he looked like any other attendant, thanks to the white jacket.

Three hours later Don Strong was outside his father's home in New York. He had spent more than half of the attendant's eight dollars in getting there.

This was his father's town house, an old mansion on a quiet side street in an exclusive residential section. His father owned a country home in Connecticut and a winter home in Florida. Strong, senior, had also maintained a shooting lodge in Scotland, but he had disposed of that when the war started.

The house was dark, with the exception of one room, in which a light was dimly visible. It was a ground floor room: the library, Don Strong knew. Peering through the window, he caught a glimpse of an old man. The man was sitting in a chair, and a reading lamp burned beside him.

But he didn't seem to be reading. He didn't seem to be doing anything. He was all slumped down in the chair. His head, bent forward, was resting in the palms of his hands.

Don Strong's plan was simple: to find out what had happened to his father. To do that he would have to observe the actions of his father without being observed himself.

He stood there on the pavement, considering what he should do. He had to get into the house, and that quickly. The white jacket he was wearing now, had gotten him out of the sanitarium. But here in this residential section, it would be an object of intense curiosity on the part of the first cop or the first private watchman who came along.

He had to get in the house. He could, of course, go up to the front door and ring the bell. He discarded the idea as soon as it entered his mind. To ring the bell would win him a fast ride back to Dr. Renault's sanitarium.

Obviously he must enter by stealth. Once inside, there were deep closets where he could hide. And in his own room he could secure some of his own clothes.

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AT THE back, he knew of a basement window with a broken lock.

There was a driveway beside the house. It led to the garage at the back. Don Strong slipped quietly down the driveway. At the rear of the house, he halted. Something was wrong back here. Something was not quite as he remembered it. He stood there in the pitch-black darkness, trying to think what it was.

It was dark, darker than a dungeon back here. That was it. That was what was wrong. The darkness! There was a light on a pole halfway between the house and the garage. It had been put there to keep out night prowlers. It was turned on every night. But it wasn't burning now. That was what was wrong. The light was out.

Perhaps the bulb had burned out, he thought. No matter. That made it easier for him. Nobody would see him enter the house. He groped forward, moving toward the basement window. Suddenly he stopped, his senses tingling.

Directly ahead of him, about three feet above the ground, was a glowing spot of light.

A spot of light!

It was about as big as a dime. It did not burn brightly but seemed to glow with a pale milky fluorescence. Like witch fire, like a spot of damp phosphorus, like a single unwinking eye, it hung in the air about three feet above the ground.

A tiny electric chill shot up Strong's spine.

The spot of light winked out.

Strong did not move. He could feel the hair rising along the nape of his neck.

Something was there in the pitch-black darkness. Something kept watch here. Something lurked here, at the back of his father's house. Was that the reason the light out on the pole was out? The thought jarred him. Was the light on the pole out so something could lurk here in the darkness?

Was there some ghostly watcher here in the rear of his father's house?

CHAPTER IV

His Father's House

THIS is 1942, Don Strong grimly told himself. There aren't any ghosts. This is a modern world, a scientific world. Ghosts belong back in the dark ages. But where the devil did that spot of light go? I saw it, he told himself. It was there, like an eye watching me. Then it vanished. Where did it go? What the devil was it?

Straining his eyes, he could make out a dark form in the blackness. It was vaguely human. He could discern dimly the head and shoulders of a man.

A man! Lurking here! Then what about that spot of light? And what was a man doing here?

He didn't seem to be doing anything. Just standing still and keeping mighty quiet. The quietness and

[*Turn page*]

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the stillness were threats in themselves.

Then the man moved! Strong could barely see the dark figure. He was slipping toward the alley at the back. He was clearing out. But what about that spot of light?

Strong saw the light again. It flashed on and off beside the man. Strong gasped in relief. It had come from a ring on the man's hand. There must be a stone setting in a ring. Or from something the man held in his hand.

But that didn't explain the man himself. It didn't explain what he was doing here. Listening, Strong caught the faint rasp of leather on concrete, the dim creak of the gate at the rear. The fellow had cleared out.

Some prowler, Strong thought with relief. A burglar out prowling in the night. I scared him off.

He found the basement window, pushed against it. The broken lock had not been repaired. He slipped into the basement.

There was a housekeeper, a cook, and a maid. They slept on the third floor. There was also a butler. He slept on the second floor at the back. It was well after midnight and probably all of them were asleep by now. Only his father would be awake. And he was in the library on the first floor.

Strong removed his shoes. They were the attendant's shoes and they hurt his feet. He was glad to get rid of them. There was no light in the basement, but he had been born in this house and he knew the basement as well as he knew the palm of his own hand.

In his stocking feet he went silently across the basement, silently up the stairs. Silently he opened the door from the basement, and in silence he crept toward the front hall.

The door of the library was open. Through it he could see his father. The old man had not moved from his position in the chair. His hands were still up over his face. Don could see the hands plainly. The fingers were long and thin and white. There was a ring on the second finger of the right hand. Don could see it.

His father had never worn a ring. But he was wearing one now. It was set with a single stone about as big as a dime. The stone was milky white. And it glowed with a pale phosphorescence!

Even in the light from the reading lamp the pale phosphorescence was plainly visible, glowing like a single, baleful, malefic eye.

A cold electric chill again flashed up Don Strong's spine. His father, who had never worn jewelry of any kind, was now wearing a ring. A ring with a glowing stone. The prowler in the back had worn or held a glowing stone in his hand.

Don remembered, with a shock that startled him, that when he returned from his vacation and entered his father's office to discover what he thought was an impostor, his father had been wearing that ring. He had noticed it but had thought nothing of it at the time.

WAS there some connection between the ring and the strange change in his father's personality?

He brushed the idea away.

"That oily psychiatrist was right," he thought. "I *am* nuts!"

But the ring was there and the prowler at the back had worn a ring! No, the ring could not be brushed away that easily.

Suddenly his father took his hands away from his face. He looked around the library, and Don had the impression that the old man sensed his presence. Perhaps he had left a door open and a draft was blowing where there had been no draft before. Perhaps his father felt the draft and was looking around to see where it came from. Perhaps—

He looked around for a place to hide if his father rose from the chair. There was a closet in the hall. It was a big closet. He turned the knob and got ready to duck inside if it became necessary. Then—

"Go away," a voice said. "Please go away and leave me alone."

Don Strong froze. He knew that voice. It was his father speaking!

He slipped into the closet, left

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the door open a crack. Through the slit he could see into the library. His father was still sitting in the chair. He was looking around.

"Please go away," he said. "Please."

Was there another person in the library? Don had looked through the window and his father had seemed to be alone. But if there wasn't another person in the library, to whom was his father talking?

There was a curious electric tension all over his body as he watched the scene. His father seemed to be half asleep. He seemed to be talking in his sleep, though. In sleep the subconscious mind comes to the surface. Sleep-talk is talk from the subconscious, from that dark region of mystery hidden away in the human mind.

That was it. His father was talking in his sleep. Or was that the explanation? Was there another, more subtle, more insidious explanation?

He could hear a watch ticking.

Watching, he saw his father rise from his chair, walk aimlessly across the library, return to the chair and collapse in it. That was the way he sat down. He collapsed.

Don could still hear a watch ticking.

He didn't have a watch. His watch was locked up with his valuables in Dr. Renault's sanitarium. It was very quiet in the closet. And in the quietness he could hear a watch ticking.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock.

Ticking rapidly, hurriedly, faster than any watch he had ever heard before. In this closet! Within a few feet of him! A watch ticking.

Don's palms felt greasy. Slick. Dampness was spreading over his body.

Was someone else hiding in this closet, someone who had a watch?

There was a light in the closet. It wasn't burning now. Somewhere in the darkness, in the center of the closet, was a pull chain that would turn the light on. Don closed the door. He reached out into the darkness for the pull chain that he knew was there.

How badly scared he was, only he knew. There might be another person in the closet. There might be anything here. But scared or not scared, he was going to turn on that light.

He found the chain. He pulled it.

Nothing happened. The light didn't turn on.

It was a horrible moment. He had steeled himself for the light and what the light would reveal. But it wouldn't turn on.

THE watch stopped ticking.

Strong struck a match. He held the match in his right hand. The left jab that the hospital attendant had envied was ready to let go. But there was no one else in the closet. An old raincoat that belonged to him was hanging on a hook at the back. Otherwise the closet was empty. It was almost never used, he knew.

He saw why the light hadn't turned on. The bulb had been removed. It had been replaced by a screwed-in plug. From the plug a wire ran to a closet shelf. The wire entered a small black box sitting far back on the closet shelf.

Don Strong reached up and pulled the light chain.

The watch started ticking again. The watch was in that black box. But he knew now it wasn't a watch. It was something else, some electrical instrument.

A step sounded in the hall outside. The knob of the closet door rattled as a hand grasped it.

The door of the closet opened.

CHAPTER V

The Ticking Box

STRONG was trapped. Who was entering the closet he did not know. Whoever it was, he certainly did not want to be caught. Crouching below the shelf, he jerked the raincoat from its hook and held it in front of him. It offered inadequate concealment, but unless the person entering the closet already knew he was there, he might pass unnoticed.

Who was entering the closet? What did he want? Questions popped

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through Don Strong's mind with machine-gun rapidity.

The door opened and his father entered.

Had he made some slight noise and had his father heard and come to investigate? Don did not know. He held his breath, and watched.

His father did not reach for the light-switch cord. In that moment the significance of that fact did not strike Don. Later, he would realize what it meant. Now he watched. His father did not try to turn on the light.

Instead he struck a match. Holding the match in front of him, standing on tiptoes, he examined the ticking box. The examination was cursory. He looked at the box, poked it once with his finger.

"It's all right," he muttered, as though speaking to himself. "It's working all right."

Dropping the match, he turned and went out of the closet, closing the door behind him.

"Holy Jumping Jupiter!" Don Strong gasped to himself. "What's going on here?"

He was wet with perspiration. On the shelf above him he could hear the ticking box. Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. Like the hammer of a dwarf beating rhythmically and evilly on a tiny hidden anvil. There was evil in the sound. Evil! The dwarf beat viciously on that hidden anvil.

"I heard that confounded ticking and reached up and turned on the light," Strong said to himself. "But the pull socket was already turned on. When I pulled the chain, I turned off the current. Whatever is in that box is drawing current from the lighting system. Whatever is in the box, it operates by electricity. That much is clear. But—how did Dad know the ticking box was no longer operating?"

He wiped sweat from his face, tried to think clearly. He had a hunch that clear thinking was desperately important.

"The second that box stopped ticking he knew it. He came to see what was wrong with it. He came in here, punched at it, and muttered that it was working all right. The second it stopped working, he came in here—No, by gad! He didn't! He didn't come to the closet until I turned it on again!"

What the devil did it mean? That there was some connection between the ticking box and his father was obvious. But — Don Strong knew his father. The old man had absolutely no interest in electrical gadgets, nor any knowledge. He couldn't even screw a new lamp bulb into its socket. Therefore he had not built that ticking box. Then who had built it?

"That question will have to be answered later," Strong thought. "Right now, the only question is what is the connection between that box and my father."

There was only one way to get an answer: experiment and find out. Strong opened the door of the closet a crack. His father was in the library. He was sitting in the chair again, his head cupped in his hands.

Don Strong reached up and pulled the light-switch chain. The box stopped ticking.

Simultaneously his father slumped down in his chair. His hands fell limply in his lap, his head sagged forward on his chest. He looked as if he were unconscious. Perhaps he was unconscious.

DON pulled the light chain. The dwarf in the box began pounding on his anvil. Don's father sat up in his chair. He looked around him. There was a startled expression on his face. He looked like a man awakening from sleep.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. I'm here. All right . . ."

He rose from his chair and started toward the closet.

Again he was coming to investigate. He was through the library door, he was halfway across the hall. He was heading straight toward the closet. There was no doubting what he intended to do. He walked stiffly, mechanically, a man in a daze. But if his walk was mechanical, if his gaze was fixed, there was no doubting that he was heading straight toward the closet.

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And he seemed to be under compulsion. He did not seem to be acting under his own will. He seemed to be compelled.

Don Strong pulled the light cord again.

Every muscle relaxed, every joint limber, like a contortionist falling, like a man stricken suddenly dead, the old man fell to the floor. The instant the current was cut off, the instant the box stopped ticking, he fell.

Don fought down the impulse to go to him. Instinctively, automatically, he started for his father in order to help him to his feet, to call a physician, to get help. Was revealing his presence, helping his dad, calling a physician the right thing to do? It might not be. It might easily result in the death of his father.

Unknown, hidden, weird forces were in operation, forces that seemingly went beyond the knowledge of science. The forces, somehow, had control of his father. Before he could help, Don Strong knew he had to know what was happening. Otherwise he might blunder like a fool, and his blundering might result in the death of the man he was trying to help.

He also fought down the impulse to panic. Under no circumstances must he lose his head now. But—what to do?

There was only one thing to do. Part of his problem—a part that had been driving him nearly frantic—was solved. But its solution only opened greater mysteries beyond.

Opening the door of the closet, he stepped into the hall. His father did not move a muscle. Don knelt beside him. He could not resist doing that much. A swift examination disclosed that his father was breathing softly and deeply. He lay in a trance, but he wasn't dead.

Don sighed in relief. He reached inside the closet, grasped the light chain, gave it a jerk, then raced down the hall and through the door leading to the basement. His stocking feet made no noise as he ran.

Leaving the basement door open

Strong gazed in amazement as the fleeing youth went down (Chap. XI)

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a crack, he looked back. His father was rising from the floor! As if nothing had happened, he was getting up. He went straight into the closet.

Don went on down to the basement. He retrieved the attendant's shoes. He stood a long time in thought. He heard his father walk across the hall upstairs, returning to the library.

Don Strong needed help. He needed clothes, he needed money, he needed advice, from someone he trusted, from someone who knew. Someone who knew about—impossible—things.

THAT meant Rikki. He could trust Rikki. And Rikki knew . . . about impossible things. Many people thought Rikki was an occulist, a spiritualist, a faker. Rikki wasn't any of these things. He was a screwball who believed with Shakespeare that there are more mysteries in heaven and earth than are dreamt about in a man's philosophy.

Rikki had spent most of the twenty-seven years of his life investigating those mysteries. He was the same age as Don Strong. They had been friends since childhood.

Rikki Walsh. Rikki, who laughed at holy things, and sneered, and made bright cracks, and was never serious about anything, because he walked with mysteries, because he suspected the existence of hidden things and did not dare let himself be serious. Rikki's wisecracks hid fear. Rikki's laughter hid fear. That was why he laughed and was never serious: to hide his fear.

Rikki Walsh, Don Strong thought. He's my man.

He went out the basement window. Although he kept a close watch, he did not see the prowler who had lurked at the back of the house when he entered.

CHAPTER VI

Rikki Walsh

DON STRONG pounded on the door. He beat a tattoo on the knocker. Rikki lived down near Greenwich Village. Rikki always lived in the strangest places. He didn't seem to mind where he lived. Just as long as the rooms were cheap and there were screwballs in the neighborhood with whom to congregate.

Rikki had been at various times an actor, a painter of sorts, a writer. He had been—and still was—a scientist of sorts. But his science was not the same science that was taught in the universities. It ran to subjects rigidly excluded from college curricula.

Strong pounded on the door.

"Go away," a sleepy voice said. "Whoever you are, go away."

"Open up!" Strong shouted. "Rikki! Open up! It's me."

"Go away, Mister Me. I'm asleep and I don't want to wake up until sometime next week."

Strong almost tore the door from its hinges.

"I'm going to call the police," a sleepy voice said from inside. "I'm going to call the police and have you tossed in the jug for disturbing the sleep of honest people. Go away before I wake up."

Strong replied by kicking the door. He knew Rikki. Rikki wouldn't call the police. Rikki just wasn't awake. Eventually he would wake up enough to wonder who was knocking on his door. Then he would get curious and investigate. When Rikki became curious, he automatically investigated.

The door opened at last. Rikki looked out. He was tall and skinny and looked as if he hadn't had a square meal in months. Probably he hadn't, his habits being what they were. Wearing a pair of violent green pajamas, he looked like a scarecrow that had been left out in the rain too long. Tousled black hair, a thin, strong face. That was Rikki. He had one eye open. When he recognized his caller, he opened the other eye.

"Hi, Don," he said sleepily. "I thought they had you in the nut house."

"They did."

Rikki noticed the white jacket. He promptly drew the correct conclusion from it.

"And you escaped," he said.

He didn't seem perturbed to discover

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his caller had escaped from a lunatic asylum.

"Darn it," Rikki muttered fretfully. "I wish my friends would be a little more careful about the places they get themselves into. Only last week Pete Frovich came to see me. He's a burglar. Darned good one too. He had just walked away from Sing Sing without the permission of the authorities, and he wanted me to hide him until he could blow town.

"What have I done," Rikki complained, "that things like this should happen to me?"

"If you don't want to put me up—"

"Who said I didn't want to put you up? Come in, come in. Do you want to stand out here in this hall all night?"

He held the door open and Strong entered.

"Sit down," Rikki said. "Sit down and tell me whether you're a nut or not. And why. I'm intrigued."

"I'm not nuts," said Don Strong grimly. "And I can prove it."

He retold the whole story, starting with his return from the vacation and ending with a description of his father's actions and the strange ticking box in the hall closet.

"That proves I'm not insane," he concluded. "Something has happened to my father."

Only Don Strong knew how much relief the proof that he was not insane had given him. Always there had been the plaguing doubt: perhaps Dr. Renault is right. Perhaps I really am suffering from a delusion. But now he knew he wasn't.

DURING the entire story, Rikki sat without moving, smoking a cigarette. His lean hard face showed nothing of what he was thinking.

"No," he said slowly, when the other had finished. "But before we get to the bottom of this, the odds are you'll wish you were back in Renault's sanitarium, in the padded cell, admittedly nuts and glad of it. No, Don, you're not insane, but you'll probably wish you were."

Don Strong felt a sudden eruption of gooseflesh creep over him as Rikki spoke.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"How the devil should I know what I mean?" Rikki snapped. "In this, of all possible worlds, how should I know what I mean? But I do know this much, Don. There's dirty work going on at the crossroads, and it's like no dirty work that I ever ran into before. Your father is under some sort of external control, operated by some unknown method to achieve some unknown end."

He had risen to his feet, was walking with short, nervous strides back and forth across the room.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. Stregel should know about this. It's in his line."

"Who is Stregel?"

"Stregel? Oh, he's a crackpot scientist. I call him Old-truth-lies-over a-hill Stregel. He says truth lies over a hill. He's spent most of his life trying to see over it. If he should die now, in six months not even his name would be remembered.

"But a thousand years from now, when his ideas have had time to be properly evaluated and appreciated, he will be regarded as the outstanding scientist of the twentieth century. Yes, I shall want to talk to Stregel."

"But—"

"Oh, go to bed," said Rikki crossly. He dug into a dresser drawer and drew out a pair of pajamas, red ones this time. "Put these on and go to bed. And if you snore, so help me, you'll have to sleep on the floor."

"But I want to talk about this. I want to know what you think," his guest protested.

"Go to bed," Rikki yawned. "How do I know what I think?"

Rikki went back to bed. Strong could not get another word out of him, so he put on the outlandish pajamas and crawled under the covers. Rikki began snoring immediately, but Strong knew the snore was faked. Rikki was only pretending to be asleep, so he could think in peace. In spite of himself, Strong went to sleep.

When he awakened, Rikki was gone. There was a note on the table.

"Make yourself some breakfast," the note said. "I'm out investigating.

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Stay put until I get back. Remember, if you think of sticking your nose out of this dump, your escape from the sanitarium has probably been reported, and a general pickup order has gone out over the police teletype. So stay put—unless you really liked being in that padded cell."

The note was signed "Rikki."

CHAPTER VII

Rikki's Story

RIKKI WALSH was gone all day. At various times the telephone rang, and people in carefully guarded voices asked for him. Invariably they would talk to no one but Rikki. Nor would they state their business, or give a number so Rikki might call them back.

Don Strong attached no importance to the calls. Rikki had a lot of friends, and many of them were not inclined to be talkative.

Rikki returned after dark. Strong heard his steps coming up the stairs. In a fever of impatience, he opened the door. Rikki stood there.

"Where the devil have you been?" his guest demanded. "I've been cooped up here all day."

"I've been here and there," Rikki answered. "Meet Stregel."

There was another person with Rikki, a man who looked a lot like a hairy ape. He was short and squat, with long, powerful arms, and his face looked as if it had been chiseled out of granite by an amateur sculptor. It was all angles, but from it peeped two of the most alert and the blackest eyes Don Strong had ever seen.

"Glad to meet you yet," said Stregel. He held out his hand. Strong took it.

"Stregel is not so good in his English," Rikki explained. "He's a refugee, one of the early victims of Hitler's Austrian grab. But what he lacks on the language side, he more than makes up on the mathematical. I'm positive he even thinks in terms of numbers."

"Mathematics?" Strong was puzzled.

"Yah," Stregel said. "Mathematics yet. The key that will unlock the riddle of the universe, mathematics is. Nature a language speaks and it a mathematical language is. Lemaitre, Dirac, Eddington, Schrodinger, Minkowski—it is familiar with their mathematical concepts you are?"

He rattled off a string of syllables with the rapidity of machine-gun fire. Strong stared at him.

"Hold it, Stregel," Rikki interrupted. "That's all double talk to us. I know it means something to you, but Don and I are a couple of ignorant nitwits—"

"Nitwits! The mathematics you do not understand? *Donnerwetter!* Why do I have to meet up with such dumb people!"

Stregel shook his head furiously. He stalked into the apartment and went directly to the tiny kitchen, where they could hear him banging pots and pans around.

"Don't mind Stregel," Rikki said, in answer to Strong's unspoken question. "He is somewhat on the erratic side. He goes around hoping to meet someone with whom he can talk mathematics, and since there probably aren't over four or five people in the world who know as much math as he does, he is constantly being disappointed, with explosive and insulting results.

"But don't mind him. He's out in the kitchen stirring up something to eat. The next thing he likes after math is eating, and he can do things in a kitchen that will make your mouth water. He'll come bouncing out here pretty soon and invite us to a meal that will be fit for a king."

"Skip it," Strong interrupted impatiently. "I'm not interested in a discourse on Stregel's abilities. What I want to know is, what have you been doing? What happened? Where have you been?"

Rikki slid into a chair and stretched his long legs up on a foot stool.

"Well, first of all," he said, "I put a tail on your old man."

"A tail?"

"A shadow," Rikki patiently explained. "I've got a man following him, to see what he does, where he

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goes, and so forth. You know. A tail . . ."

"Oh! You hired a private detective to follow my father. That's a good idea. I thought of doing that but I waited until you returned to talk to you about it."

"Private detective?" Rikki's eyebrows went up. "Me hire a private detective! My dear sir, what would I use for money? No, the man who is following your father is a friend of mine. He also happens to be a skillful pickpocket and a thief, but he is under obligations to me. Besides, he's a better bloodhound than any detective in this man's town.

"Secondly—" Rikki pulled a folded newspaper out of his pocket and handed it over. "I guess this is second."

THE paper was folded open to a small story on an inside page.

THIEVES STEAL 1,200 TONS OF COPPER

Thieves have entered a Brooklyn warehouse and mysteriously removed 1200 tons of copper stored there, it was revealed late today by H. A. Gery, government custodian. The copper, a part of the surplus being gathered by the government to meet the wartime shortage, was in 500-pound bars.

Gery, who discovered the loss while making a routine check of government properties, was unable to say how the theft had been effected. The warehouse seals were still intact, the locks had not been broken, and the doors showed no evidence of tampering. Yet every bar of copper was gone.

The metal had been stored in the warehouse on the order of R. T. Strong, copper magnate, who is acting as purchasing agent for the government in building up a surplus of this essential wartime commodity. Mr. Strong could not be reached for a statement.

Cold chills were playing over Don Strong's flesh when he finished reading the account. Twelve hundred tons of copper, purchased by his father on order from the United States Government and stored in a warehouse selected by his father, was missing.

"What the devil does this mean?" he demanded. "Are you suggesting that my father is a thief?"

"I'm not suggesting anything," Rikki answered wearily. "If it will make you feel any better, I don't think your old man would steal copper or anything else. I would just as soon suspect Henry Ford of stealing automobiles. It would make as much sense."

"But this is ridiculous!" Strong commented, reading the story again. "It says the seals of the warehouse were unbroken, the locks were intact, and the doors had not been tampered with. That's impossible! Do they think the copper flew out through the roof?"

Rikki leaned back in the chair. He closed his eyes.

"It makes nuts, eh?" he said.

"I don't get you."

Rikki waved a hand. "It makes nuts—one of Stregel's favorite expressions. This stolen copper makes nuts."

Angry red mounted to Strong's face.

"But what happened?" he cried. "How was it stolen?" What connection is there between this missing copper and what has happened to my father?"

Rikki sat up. "A lot of people would like to know what happened. It's like the old story of a man being murdered in a locked room, son. The copper was taken from a locked and sealed warehouse. It was put under seal there by the government custodian, about three weeks ago. Now it's gone. So a lot of people would like to know what happened."

"The reporter who wrote this story got his facts mixed," Strong snapped.

"Yeah?" Rikki drawled. "I was over to that warehouse myself. The story is accurate in every particular. There were a couple of F.B.I. men over there who had scratched themselves bald trying to understand what had happened. The facts are these: the copper is gone; your old man ordered it stored there. You can make any deduction from those two facts that suits you. Me, I have made all possible deductions, and none of them suits me."

"I don't get it," Strong said stub-

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bornly. "I don't get it at all."

"Tonight we go get it," Rikki said calmly.

DON STRONG stared at him.

"Look, Rikki," he said fighting for self control. "You're a nice guy and I like you. You're my friend and you took me in last night when I didn't have any other place to go. You're helping me out and I appreciate it.

"But look, Rikki. If you don't quit talking riddles and give me a plain answer to a plain question I'm going to tear you in little pieces, as sure as God made little green apples. Tonight we go get what?"

Rikki opened both eyes. He seemed surprised at the question. The threat apparently moved him not at all.

"Tonight we go get the ticking box," he said. "Stregel wants to look at it."

That was all he would say. He closed his eyes again, leaned back in the chair. Don Strong might as well be talking to a post, for all the answers he got to his questions. But he knew Rikki wasn't just adopting a pose. Rikki didn't know the answer to any of the questions. And Rikki had thought the theft of the copper sufficiently important to warrant a trip to the scene of the robbery.

Rikki had put a shadow on Don Strong's father. He had got Stregel. Unless Don missed his guess, Stregel had an intelligence as keen as a whiplash. Rikki didn't know any answers. There was no use questioning him. But Rikki was trying, in his own highly unorthodox way, to be helpful.

"Come and get it!" Stregel bellowed, popping out of the kitchen. "Come and get it or I eat it myself."

* * * * *

They went after the ticking box. A telephone call, answered by the butler, disclosed that Don Strong's father was not at home. Their plan was to enter through the basement window, for Rikki to remain on guard there, and for Don and Stregel to reconnoiter the house by stealth. Once inside the closet, the scientist would examine the box. Stregel had brought along a small flashlight and a tiny kit of tools.

It was about eleven o'clock. The whole first floor of the house was dark.

Stregel, for all his squat bulkiness, slid through the window with the agility of a cat. Don Strong was beginning to have a vast respect for this apelike scientist. Like Rikki, Stregel was inclined to hide his serious nature beneath a careless good humor. But Strong sensed the ability of the man underneath. Whatever was in that box upstairs, Stregel was the man to solve its mysteries.

Strong was alive with eagerness as he preceded the scientist through the basement and up the stairs, Stregel's flashlight in his hand.

"This box, you say she is in the closet?" Stregel whispered.

"Yes."

"And the current, she draw it from the city lines?"

"Yes. I told you that. The bulb had been removed and the box plugged into the socket. Why? What difference does that make?"

"Hah, no difference, maybe. Maybe much difference. This box, lead me to it. Anxious I am to see what it has inside. I want to know how this box can control a man. Very much do I want to know that!"

"You don't want to know it half as much as I do," Strong said bitterly.

Flashlight turned out, he tiptoed down the hall to the closet door.

"It's in there," he said, handing the flashlight to Stregel. "There's scarcely room for two of us in the closet. You examine the box while I stay out here in the hall and keep guard."

"Yah. That is better."

The scientist took the light, opened the closet door, and vanished inside. Strong could hear him moving around in the interior of the closet. Faint guttural expletives came from inside. He wished vehemently that Stregel would be more silent.

WHAT would the box reveal? What ghastly secret was hidden behind that monotonous note?

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What would Stregel discover there?

The door of the closet opened. Stregel poked his head out. The flashlight, apparently forgotten in his hand, was still burning.

"What did you discover?" Strong whispered tensely.

"Hah? What did I discover! I discover this makes nuts!" Stregel snorted.

"What do you mean?" Strong stammered. "Can't you find out how it works?"

"Can't I find out how it works!" Stregel parroted. "How can I find out how the box works when there is no box here?"

He swept the beam of the flashlight upward, revealing the interior of the closet. Don Strong saw everything in a single glance. The closet shelf was empty. The light bulb had been replaced. The wire leading from the socket to the box was gone. The shelf was as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard.

The ticking box was gone. Gone!

"But it was there," he insisted in a fierce whisper. "I hid in the closet and heard it ticking. At first I thought someone else was hiding in the closet too, and that what I heard was his watch."

"Yah?" said Stregel. There was doubt in his voice.

Strong heard that doubt. He realized what it meant. Without the ticking box to prove his story, he had no evidence that he was not insane. As it was his story was utterly fantastic. Even Rikki would not believe it, without the box.

It suddenly struck him that perhaps this was the real reason Rikki had said they were coming here. Rikki wanted to know whether Don Strong was insane or not. Perhaps Rikki had wanted to come here himself to check on his story.

Without the box, Don Strong could not prove the evidence of his eyes and ears.

"But I tell you it was there!" he whispered desperately.

"Yah?" Stregel said. "My friend, what makes nuts? The box that ticks —or you?"

"Give me that light," said Strong fiercely. "I tell you there was a box there."

He grabbed a small hall chair, set it inside the closet. Standing on the chair, he played the beam of light over the closet.

"See!" There was fierce triumph in his whisper. "There's dust on this closet shelf. You can see where the box sat. Darn you, take a look at this mark before you call me a liar."

He got down from the chair, handed the light to Stregel. The scientist swung up on the chair and poked his nose over the closet shelf.

"Yah," he said, a moment later. "You are right, my friend. There is a mark in the dust here. Something sat here."

"Something! It was a box, I tell you."

Stregel shrugged. "Something sat here. Maybe it was a box, maybe it was something else. Me, I am inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt. It was a ticking box. It sat here. When you turned it off, your father collapsed. When you turned it on, he revived.

"Yah." The scientist nodded thoughtfully. "You would not have brought us here if there was no box. I believe you. But where is the box now?"

Don Strong did not know whether to be relieved or not. Stregel seemed to believe him, and that helped. But where was the box? Why had it been moved? A thought struck him.

"Whoever put that box in here made a mistake in the first place," he said rapidly. "The light bulb was removed and the wire screwed into the empty socket. That was a mistake."

"Why?" said Stregel.

STRONG measured his words.

"Because anyone who entered the closet would do just what I did—reach up and turn on the light by pulling the chain. That would cut the current from the box. When I turned the current on and off, I must have rung a signal somewhere. Remember, my father came in to see if the box was all right. Whoever installed it must have discovered what had happened—"

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"Yah!" Stregel interrupted. "Yah, you got it, boy. A mistake, they made, plugging the box into an ordinary light socket. Anybody who tried to turn on the light would turn off the box. Yah! So what did they do? They moved the box. You got it, boy, you got it! But where did they put the box?"

From somewhere within the hall came a sharp snap, like the sound of a switch closing. Simultaneously the lights went on. A man stood at the foot of the stairs. One hand was still touching the switch where he had turned on the light. The other hand held a gun.

CHAPTER VIII

The Vanishing Box

THE man with the gun took one look at the two men standing beside the open closet. The gun wavered.

"Mister Don!" he exclaimed.

It was the butler. Hearing a noise downstairs, he had come to investigate.

"What—I mean, sir?" he stammered.

"You thought I was in the sanitarium," Don Strong finished for him.

"No, no, sir! It wasn't that, sir. The police were here looking for you too, so I knew you were no longer in the sanitarium. I was just surprised, sir, finding you here."

The butler had been with the family for years. He fulfilled the functions of an old family retainer to a nicety. But he was nonplussed now. The ethics of butlering did not include what to do when you caught the son of your employer—recently committed to a sanitarium for the mentally ill—apparently burglarizing the house.

Should you bow and say, "Very good sir. Shall I call the booby-wagon, sir?" Or should you go back to bed and try to pretend nothing had happened?

It was not a situation that even a perfectly trained butler could handle with aplomb. This Strong butler did not know what to do. Apparently the situation called for action of some kind, but he couldn't decide what it was. He began to shiver, shake, sweat and stammer.

"What did you mean—the police have been here looking for me *too*?" Don Strong demanded.

"I—ah—sir—."

"Speak up!"

"Well, sir, the truth is, sir . . ."

The butler mopped perspiration from his forehead. He was mentally resolving, in spite of his years of service, to give notice in the morning.

"Out with it," Strong commanded. He was cold as ice inside. He suspected he knew what the answer to his question would be.

"They—your father—the truth is, sir, the police were here looking for Mr. Strong this afternoon, sir."

The police wanted his father! Don gritted his teeth.

"Did they say what they wanted with him?"

"N-no, sir. They were singularly uncommunicative, sir. I gathered they were federal men, sir, rather than the municipal police."

"Hah!" said Stregel. "This makes not so much nuts now. I begin to see the daylight. Was Mr. Strong here?"

"N-no, sir."

"Has he been here all day?" Stregel went on.

"N-no, sir."

"Do you know where he is?"

"Assuredly not, sir!"

"Yah." Stregel nodded. "That makes sense." Abruptly he changed the subject. "There was in this closet a box," he said. "Where is it? What became of it?"

The butler looked blank. "I know of no box, sir. Mr. Strong had specifically instructed the staff, sir, not to enter this closet. I do not know what was in there, sir."

"The devil!" Stregel gasped. Muttering to himself, the scientist went off in deep thought.

Don Strong resumed the questioning. Out of the answers emerged a stunning revelation. According to the butler's story, about three weeks in the past Don's father had undergone a tremendous change. He

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had become moody, irritable, and he had seemed to lose all interest in his normal activities. Upon several occasions the butler had heard him engaging in conversation when he was alone.

"I had the distinct impression that someone else was with him, sir. But there was no one, apparently. I entered the library once, when I heard him talking, to make certain. He was talking to himself, sir, or—"

NOW the man's words faltered. He could not bring himself to say what he suspected: that his employer was either subject to hallucinations or was carrying on a conversation with someone—or with something—that the butler couldn't see.

"He instructed the staff to stay away from the hall closet, sir. He also instructed us to discontinue turning on the light at the rear of the house. The light was installed, as you no doubt remember, sir, to discourage night prowlers. But Mr. Strong ordered that it was to be turned on under no circumstances."

Remembering his entry the previous night, Don Strong knew there had been a prowler lurking at the rear. Had the light been turned off so some secret watcher could hide in the darkness without being seen? The person Don had seen had been wearing a ring. And his father had also worn a ring.

"Do you know where my father got that ring he was wearing?" he asked.

"No, sir," the butler answered. "I—all the staff—noticed it, sir, and—it was my impression, sir—"

The butler hesitated and looked particularly uncomfortable.

"Don't try to spare my feelings by holding something back," Strong told him.

"Yes, sir. I was going to say—" He hesitated again, groped for words and looked appealingly at his inquisitor, as if he did not want to say what he thought.

"Go on," Don Strong said grimly.

"Well, sir, I had the impression that when I overheard your father carrying on a conversation when no one was with him, he was—I had the impression he was talking to the ring, sir!"

Talking to the ring! Don Strong's face showed his bewilderment. He was desperately seeking some rational explanation, something that he could understand. But talking to a ring was not rational. It was like talking to a chair, to a piece of furni-

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ture, to a door. A sane person would not carry on a conversation with a ring.

"Yah!" said Stregel abruptly. "It makes sense, hah!"

The scientist had come to life and was vigorously nodding his head, as if he had come across a grain of truth that was hidden in a mountain of falsehood.

"You mean talking to a ring makes sense!" Strong gasped.

"Could be," Stregel answered, nodding vigorously. "Could be. I am not certain yet, but—could be. Your father we will have to find, to make sure—"

That was all Don Strong needed, to find a single man among the millions in New York, a man that the F.B.I. was apparently searching for without success.

STREGEL would not amplify his statement.

"We go now," he said slowly. "But first—" He turned to the butler. "You keep shut, see?" he said, glaring. "Or I, personally, your frame will climb, and that makes for murder, *versteh?*"

"Y-you can rely upon my loyalty to the family I have served s-so long," the butler stuttered, staring at Stregel as if the latter were a bull gorilla threatening him.

The scientist grinned and his face lost some of its savagery.

"That is good," he said. "You are a good man, maybe. We go now."

Outside the house, they found Rikki still keeping his vigil.

He listened attentively to what they had to say.

"So the ticking box is gone?" he said. "And your father is gone too. Don, I hate to say it, but it looks to me as if somebody has removed the evidence before we got to it."

"Yah, dot is it," Stregel agreed. "The box, it would have told us something, maybe too much. So the box it is taken away. Your father, he could have told us something too, maybe, so he is taken away. We have to find him. When we find him, we find the ring and the box, and things no longer make nuts, hah!"

It was apparent that this deduction was quite correct. It was equally apparent that Stregel anticipated no difficulty in locating R. T. Strong. The secrets of the universe were often hard to discover.

But a man—you could always find a man, somewhere.

"We go back to Rikki's place, now, huh?" Stregel queried. "Me, I could eat again."

"All you think about is your big stomach," Rikki commented.

"Dot is not true," Stregel defended himself. "Sometimes I think of drinking, yet."

"Look here," Don Strong protested. "We've got to find my father. There isn't any time to be lost. He may be in danger, he may need help—"

The words were choked. He was in an agony of apprehension. Time was precious; but in spite of that, Rikki and Stregel, who had promised to help him, seemingly could think of nothing more important than eating.

"If you fellows don't want to go along with me, you don't have to," he said bitterly.

"Take it easy, Don," Rikki said with his usual calm. "We're not going back to my place just to eat, but to wait for a telephone call from a man whom I am trusting to do what the F.B.I. can't do—find your father. This is all we can do—wait. We can't comb New York for one man. So we go back to my place and—"

"Dis pickpocket, when he gets around to it, he calls us up and tells us where is the man we want," Stregel finished.

DON STRONG had forgotten the pickpocket Rikki had set to work on his father's trail. He remembered him now, with a glow of gratitude. Good old Rikki! He thought of everything, and anything he didn't think of, Stregel apparently supplied. Yet to listen to them, one would think a serious thought never entered their heads.

All the way back to Rikki's apartment, they argued violently about the best way to prepare roast beef. Yet they were doing their best to help him, Strong knew.

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CHAPTER IX

The Secret Cult

THE girl had green eyes, copper hair and a generous mouth. She was pretty, if you happened to be interested in such things. Rikki Walsh wasn't interested. To him, the female of the species was a luxury that he could not afford.

Stregel wasn't interested, either. It is doubtful if, in his pursuit of more fascinating mysteries, he had ever discovered that women existed. And Don Strong had too many other things on his mind even to notice the girl.

A telephone call had come through from a man by the name of Trait, pickpocket and thief, irascibly demanding to know whether Rikki wanted him to tail R. T. Strong to hades, or what. Sarcastic words had sped back and forth. At the end, Trait had told them to meet him here, in this ratty saloon in lower New York, and he would give them the dope.

They were drinking beer at the bar and waiting for Trait when the girl came in.

"Rikki!" she cried delightedly, coming toward them. "I haven't seen you in months. Where have you been?"

Rikki was swigging beer when he heard his name called. Beer stein still at his lips, he turned to see who had hailed him. Looking the girl over, he broke into a slow grin.

"Hi, Babe. Have some beer."

"Thanks, bum," she answered. "And don't call me Babe."

"Don't call me a bum," Rikki retorted.

"That's what you are, isn't it?"

"I guess so," Rikki said, sighing. "I guess so. But it hurts to have the word flung in my missing teeth. Meet my friends." He introduced Stregel and Strong.

"Yah," said Stregel, unimpressed.

"How do you do?" said Don Strong.

He gathered that the girl's name was Jean Sharp, and he also noticed she was staring straight at him.

"Well, well," she said. "So this is where you are. Rikki," she continued, turning, "how does it happen that everybody who gets in trouble around this burg runs straight to you?"

"Hey!" Strong gasped. This girl had apparently recognized him.

"He's not nuts," Rikki defended. "At least, I don't think so."

"He's in your company and you say that!" Jean Sharp said.

"Well, he's not any nuttier than I am," Rikki replied grumpily.

"That gives him plenty of leeway, son," the girl said, laughing. She turned to Don Strong. "Don't worry, Mr. Strong. I have no intention of reporting your whereabouts to the police. If I did, I am sure Rikki would throttle me—"

"With pleasure," Rikki interrupted. "You have such a soft white throat."

But Strong was still upset. "How did you happen to recognize me?" he demanded.

Knowing that he was still very much wanted by the police as an escaped lunatic, the girl's prompt recognition had startled him. He couldn't afford to be sent back to Dr. Renault's sanitarium now.

"The girl works on a newspaper," Rikki explained. "She knows all, sees all, and tells too darned much."

Jean Sharp laughed. "Your picture was in the paper a few days ago, when they sent you off to the booby hatch. I saw it. 'Millionaire's Son Sent to Sanitarium for Observation!' I assumed that meant you had kept up the tradition of rich men's sons and had gotten stiff once too often, so your old man packed you off to take the cure. That's how I recognized you.

"By the way," she asked casually, "what was wrong with you?"

"I—"

"He had the snakes," Rikki interrupted. "And it's no story, Miss Newshawk, so you needn't try to pump him. Everything is strictly off the record."

"Aw, shucks!" the girl complained. "What's a gal to do? Every time I pick up a hot story, it's off the record." She smiled at Don Strong. "Don't worry, Mr. Strong. Rikki's attempt to mislead me did not deceive me for an instant. But your secret, whatever it is, is safe with me. You hope."

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"Thanks," Strong answered uncertainly. He liked the breezy manner of this girl, in spite of the fact that she baffled him completely. Maybe he didn't know all about women, after all.

"What are you doing down here anyway, Miss Girl Reporter?" Rikki asked.

"I don't believe in withholding my secrets," the girl replied promptly. "Believe it or not, I'm on the trail of a gang of devil-worshipers!"

SILENCE fell as she made her announcement. Rikki actually looked startled. Even Stregel momentarily left off communing with the bottom of his beer mug. Don Strong stared at the girl. He had never heard of devil-worshipers.

"Who's nutty now?" Rikki demanded.

"So help me," Jean Sharp said. "It's the truth if I ever told it. Somewhere down here in this neighborhood is a gang of devil-worshipers. It's a cult, and according to my tip, they have discovered a sure-fire method of communicating with the Old Gentleman with Horns, himself. They have a secret shrine hidden away somewhere, and the Old Boy appears to them and tells them what to do."

"But that is ridiculous!" Don Strong objected.

"So are earthquakes and wars and plagues and famines," Rikki answered. "A cult of devil-worshipers!" he mused. "And I hadn't heard of it until now! Give, Bright Eyes," he demanded of Jean Sharp. "What else does our Inquiring Reporter know?"

"That's all," she told him. "I heerd they wuz down here so I come down a-lookin' fer 'em. It would make a nice story, I thought, if I could get it."

"It sure would!" Rikki snorted. "If you did get it and they didn't like publicity, you might also make a nice corpse! How many fool children did your mother raise, anyhow?"

"Me, I'm the only one," Jean grinned. "But seriously, Rikki, it looks like a good story. Do you think getting it might be dangerous?"

"How do I know what I think?" Rikki answered irascibly. "For all I know, your devil-worshipers might turn out to be an old lady's sewing circle, distorted by rumor. In which case, you could have a cup of tea and drop a stitch or two.

"On the other hand, it might turn out to be exactly what you say it is—a cult that worships the devil, in which case this sad old world might have to stagger on its way without your charming presence. In either case, the time has come for all good girls to beat it."

"Beat it?" Jean questioned. "You mean you don't want me around?"

"I got to see a man about a dog," Rikki answered. "This man is allergic to strangers. You talk to Don and Stregel while I am about my business."

A man had entered the saloon. He cast one quick glance around the smoke-filled dive, taking in the booths along the wall, the couples dancing to the music of the juke box in the rear, and then moved as silently as a shadow to the bar. He was thin and sallow, and so unobtrusively dressed that you had to look twice to make certain he was there.

"That's Trait," Rikki said to Don Strong. "You stay here while I talk to him."

Trait [illegible]he pickpocket, the man who knew where his father was! Strong would have preferred to talk to Trait personally but he realized that Rikki knew best. He was vaguely aware that his pulse was quickening. His eyes never left the two men.

Rikki had taken his mug of beer and had moved down the bar beside Trait. The two men began to talk, and from their faces you might have thought they were discussing the weather. Trait spoke entirely out of the corner of his mouth, the words so softly uttered they could not be heard two feet away. Unconsciously, his eyes on the two men, Strong brought the mug of beer to his lips and drank.

"That mug has been empty for five minutes, Mr. Strong," he heard a voice say at his elbow.

"Huh? What's that?"

He looked around. Jean Sharp

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smiled impishly at him. He stared at the empty mug as if he was seeing it for the first time.

"Oh. So it is," he decided.

"I don't like to be inquisitive, Mr. Strong," the girl continued. "But what, exactly, brings you three lads down here?"

"What's that?" His eyes narrowed. How much could he tell this girl? She looked trustworthy, but after all she was a reporter, paid for getting news.

He shook his head. "Sorry. We heard the beer was especially good down here and came to sample it."

"So you're hard to get," Jean said, sighing. "Well, I don't blame you. If my father was in trouble and I was trying to help him out, I wouldn't be inclined to talk about it to strangers, either."

JEAN'S words jarred him, but he was aware that the green eyes were fixed critically on him.

"I didn't know you had a father, Miss Sharp," he answered, smiling. "I suspected, from your pixie attitude, that like Topsy you just grew."

The green eyes regarded him gravely. Then they smiled.

"You'll do," she said. "I thought I could trap you into what the police would call a 'damaging revelation' but you wouldn't be trapped."

"I don't know what you are talking about," Don Strong answered.

"Let's skip it," she said.

Then Rikki came back. He looked at the girl and then at Strong, hesitated a second.

"I just spent five hundred bucks of your dough, pal, payable at the earliest date you can manage," he said. "Is that all right with you?"

Five hundred dollars! Trait had apparently demanded a payoff for his information. Strong didn't have five hundred dollars, but he would have it as soon as this mess was cleared up.

"Quite all right," he nodded, glancing warningly at the girl.

Rikki saw the warning glance. He chose to ignore it.

"I don't think you need to worry about her, Don. She's going with us." He turned to the girl. "Did I hear you promise that what you are about to see and hear will not be released for publication until I give the word?"

"Why, Rikki!" Her smile would have melted a stone. "You know how much you can trust me."

Rikki didn't melt. "Don't turn that eye juice on me, Babe. It won't work. Did I hear you promise?"

"Oh, darn it, all right!" she snapped. "I promise. But why are you so suddenly including me in this party?"

"Because it was your idea in the first place," Rikki answered. "We're going to see the devil-worshipers!"

"The devil-worshipers!" Strong gasped. "You mean my father is mixed up in *that?*"

"Quiet down," Rikki warned, and Don Strong was aware that his sharp cry had caused curious eyes to turn in his direction. "Trait trailed your father to an old curio shop. The old boy went in and didn't come out. Trait nosed around in the neighborhood and asked questions. He learned that this curio shop is the entrance to the temple of the lads who worship the devil.

"Your father is in there, Don. What he is doing there, I don't know; but Trait learned that they have fixed up a regular temple in an old abandoned warehouse at the rear of the curio shop. He also learned of a way to get in without being seen. He is willing to guide us back there—which, incidentally, is the reason his services come high.

"Five hundred dollars is the price he demands for risking his neck, and he says we're also risking our necks when we enter that place. You still want to go?" He looked at Strong.

"Yes," said Don Strong fiercely.

"What about you, Bright Eyes?" Rikki questioned the girl. "Is the chance of a story worth the risk of your neck?"

"I'm game," Jean Sharp answered flippantly. "My neck is second-hand now, anyhow."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Stregel demanded.

Rikki had not asked him if he still wanted to go. Rikki knew the apelike scientist. Truth might lie over a hill,

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or it might lie hidden in the temple of a cult of devil-worshipers. Wherever it was hidden, Stregel would want to know about it.

"Shove off," Stregel said. "Curious it is I am to see what it is this bunk about the devil. Bah! A lie of some kind it is, I bet. Shove off!"

They shoved off. Don Strong was fiercely exultant. Here was action at last. Here, also, was a totally unforeseen and startling development. A ticking box, a man who did not know his own son, a ring that a man talked to, twelve hundred tons of missing copper. Now there was another factor to fit into a mad equation. Devil-worshipers!

What did it all mean?

CHAPTER X

Temple of the Devil

THE basement was pitch dark. And it stank. The air was muggy with the foul odor of mildew, damp and rot. There were rats here too. Big fellows. Strong could smell them. He could hear them scurrying in the darkness. Something brushed against his foot. Cursing, he kicked at the thing that had touched him.

"Quiet!" Trait hissed nervously.

The pickpocket had a pencil flashlight. He used it cautiously. Across the basement a flight of stairs led upward.

"We go up there," Trait said. "We're right under the joint."

The place was as quiet as a tomb. Except for the scurrying of the rats there wasn't a sound.

"There's nobody up there," said Trait, listening. "But that's where they've got your old man."

Don appreciated the suggestion that his father was being held prisoner. Yet—the thought was a maggot eating at his brain—suppose his father wasn't being held prisoner! Strong, senior, had apparently come here of his own will. Suppose he belonged to this sect of people who worshiped the devil!

They went up the stairs, one at a time, Trait in the lead. The pickpocket wasn't using his flashlight now. There was a door at the top of the steps. Trait opened it a crack, peered through.

"The place is empty," he whispered. "Come on."

If it had been dark in the basement, it was darker up here, if such a thing was possible. Obviously no warehouse would have been built without windows, but every window had either been painted or boarded over. The darkness was Stygian. It was literally too dark to see your hand held before your face.

To Don Strong the blackness was like a cold fog pressing all around him. He could hear Jean Sharp breathing softly beside him, and Stregel puffing. The air was close—too close.

"Nobody home," Jean Sharp whispered. "Why don't we turn on some lights?"

"Shut up!" Strong hissed.

His eyes had caught a flicker of light in the gloom. It winked into existence and then winked out, like some supernatural eye opening for an instant.

"What is it?" Rikki whispered.

"Sh—!" Strong warned. "We're not alone."

A centipede with a million legs was crawling up his spine. He sniffed the air. It was close, stifling, like the air in a crowded theater with an inadequate ventilating system. There was a faint reek of sweat in it. He could *smell* human beings!

Coming into this place was like entering a room where too many people have been cooped up for too long. The contrast between the air here and the air in the basement was unmistakable. There were human beings here, dozens of them; their breath and the sweat from their bodies had polluted the air.

Then—the air stirred. Don Strong could feel a current blowing on his face.

Bang!

He heard Jean Sharp gasp when the thud came. He felt his muscles crawl, then realized what had happened. They had left the door open

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and a draft, swirling through the basement, had blown it shut. Simultaneously Strong was aware of a movement in the room, a vague stirring sound, a rustling.

Something groped through the gloom near him. He froze. Footsteps passed by. Someone groped for the door, a key turned in the lock with a clicking sound, then footsteps groped their way back. Somebody sighed and sat down.

ALL over the room little winking spots of fluorescence appeared. Little lights, little glowworm jets of illumination, like—rings! Fluorescent stones set in rings, like the stone the prowler had worn, like the ring Don Strong had seen on his father's hand! That was the source of the spot of light he had first glimpsed. Someone had moved, the ring had winked on and off.

There were people here in this room, people who wore rings—the devil-worshipers! Strong could sense them all around him. He could hear them breathing, smell them, almost feel them.

Icy fingers were sprinkling drops of ultimate cold on his backbone. Here men sat in utter darkness, here men sat in silence. What was going on here in this blackness a man's eyes could not penetrate? What was hidden here?

Strong strained his eyes to see. One of those glowing circles of fluorescence was not ten feet from him. By moving his head, he could dimly make out the body of a man sitting on the floor. Or perhaps his imagination was playing him tricks. Perhaps the dark blob he seemed to see was not a man. Perhaps it was—

Then the chime sounded. Infinitely distant, infinitely far away, yet right there in the vast room, the clear note of a chime throbbed through the heavy air. A silver note, clean and true! A bell-like sound!

A stir ran through the room. Clothing rustled as bodies moved. Glowing spots of fluorescence traced trails of cold light in the air. A sense of eagerness, of expectancy, was immediately manifest.

A hand touched Don Strong and he froze. Then the hand crept into his own. It was small and it was trembling. Jean Sharp pressed close to him.

He heard Stregel mutter something and shift his feet as he moved. Whatever was going on, Stregel wanted to see it.

The chime sounded again! It was louder now, and somehow closer. Again the stir ran through the room.

Ten feet above the floor, at the far end of the room, a dull gray blob of light appeared. It was about the size of a silver dollar when Strong first saw it. A dull white in color, it looked like a single lighted porthole of an ocean liner.

But unlike a porthole, it was growing in size, enlarging. It grew to the size of a basketball, then it was four feet in diameter. It stopped growing then.

A pale illumination flowed from it, vaguely lighting the room, revealing its occupants. There were perhaps thirty men in the place, hunkered down on the floor. All of them were staring at the circle of light, staring with fixed gaze, apparently oblivious to everything else.

Someone moaned. It was such a sound as might come from the lips of a fanatic, prostrate before a hidden shrine. There was eagerness in it, and pain, and a haunted, heart-rending longing. Instantly another voice took up the sound. In a moment the room echoed and reechoed with whispering moans.

Don Strong was aware that Jean's fingers were digging into his arm. The vague light revealed his companions. Rikki was standing, feet wide apart, head thrust forward, a look of bewildered fear on his face. Stregel was in a crouch, his arms out in front of him, scowling. Trait had moved and was standing with his back against the wall, as if even here he sought to blend into his surroundings.

THE circle of light hung in the air, unsupported. Like a blank movie screen, it revealed nothing. No image moved upon its surface, but Strong was aware that he was hearing sounds

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now that he had not heard before.

Rising above the whispering moans was a shrill, high whine that made him think of a motor generator in operation. The sound was apparently coming from the circle of light. And the air in the room was moving now. Strong could feel it pressing past him, flowing over his face, seeking an exit from this strange temple.

He wondered what was setting the air in motion. It moved past him, and suddenly he was aware that the room was flooded with an odor. Not the pungent reek of unwashed bodies, not the staleness of air expelled from too many lungs, but a sharper, keener odor—ozone!

The air in the place was clean now, clean and fresh, as though a door had been opened to the outside, permitting a draft to blow through the room. *Yet no door had been opened.*

Abruptly the circle of light was blank no longer. A face looked down from it. The effect was that of a man leaning out of a window, his arms on the sill, looking down at the scene that lay below him. But the face that gazed from this circle of light was not the face of a man.

It greatly resembled a human face, except that the eyes were too close-set, the nose too long, the lips too thin—and the ears were pointed! Not rounded, as are human ears, but pointed, like the ears of a fox. And movable! Like the ears of an animal, they could be flipped forward or backward.

They were pointed forward now, but they flipped backward, then came forward again. Behind him another creature showed momentarily.

"Geeve me the deefective relays," a voice said.

It came from the creature gazing down from the circle of light. The words were in English, badly mispronounced.

A man rose swiftly from his hunkers, leaped across the room, grabbed—of all things—a short ladder. He set it against the lower edge of the circle of light. And the light supported it!

The man ran swiftly across to a small table, picked up something lying there, ran back and climbed the ladder. The things he had picked up from the table, he handed to the creature in the circle. The creature took them. And Don Strong saw what they were.

Ticking boxes!

Exactly similar to the ticking box he had found in the closet of his home! Complete to a short length of cord, apparently designed to facilitate plugging into light sockets.

Then the ticking boxes came from this temple of devil-worshipers!

The creature, man or devil, whatever he was, consulted a memorandum he held in his hand. He looked down over the group.

"Nombear seexteen!" he called sharply.

A man rose to his feet. Zombie-like he walked toward the circle of light, climbed the ladder, stepped through the circle—and out of sight! The creature standing in the light made way for him.

"Number sixteen" seemed literally to walk out of existence. The ring on his finger flashed once as he went up the ladder. Then he was gone.

The strange creature appeared again in the circle of light.

"Nombear feefty-two," he called.

Another man rose from the squatting group. An old man, who walked shakily and unsteadily toward the ladder and began to climb it. Don's heart rose up in his throat. He recognized this man.

HIS father!

R. T. Strong had been among the men squatting on the floor. Entirely oblivious of the presence of interlopers in their temple, the devil-worshipers had been staring at the creature in the circle of light as if entranced. Don did not doubt that they were entranced. Bewitched, rather. Held in thrall by a force that was more than natural.

But his father had been present all the time, unrecognized. Now the elder Strong was walking up the ladder, toward the gateway of vanishing men.

Don Strong was dazed, stunned. He did not recognize his father until

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he was well up the ladder. Before Don could decide what to do, the old man had stepped through the circle and was gone! Gone!

Vaguely Don saw Rikki flick a glance in his direction, knew that Rikki had made the same discovery he had made. Rikki didn't know what to do either, or whether to do anything.

What was there to do? You couldn't step up and say:

"Hey, Dad! Where the devil are you going? Come back here!"

The creature was leaning out of the circle again, looking down.

"Nombear height!"

A man squatting not ten feet away got quickly to his feet. But Don Strong was quicker. He took two steps forward. His left flicked out with every ounce of his strength behind it. Coming from behind, it caught the man just under the ear.

Strong caught him as he fell, eased him quickly and silently to the floor. Then he was walking forward, taking the place of the man he had slugged.

The light was dim and indistinct: too poor, Strong hoped, for the creature in the circle to see what had happened. In that bad light, it ought to look as if a man had stumbled, got to his feet and kept coming.

"Don, you darned fool!" he heard Rikki gasp.

"What monkey shines!" Stregel growled huskily.

"Don—" That was Jean Sharp calling to him.

He kept on going. He could not even guess what manner of risk he was running. He had no conception of what was taking place. His one thought was that this was some kind of a fake. Perhaps the men here were drugged.

That was it, Don Strong thought. They were drugged. And the circle of light was some bit of theatrical apparatus, a stage display made to deceive the credulous, drugged addicts squatting here. That was the only conceivable explanation. Nothing else was possible.

He flung himself up the ladder. The creature looked down at him, and Strong saw surprise and suspicion flash across the lean face. The ears flipped forward like the ears of a startled dog. Then Strong's fingers closed around the neck, his thumbs biting into the windpipe.

Wiry fingers clawed at his arms, fists beat at his face. He ducked his head and held on. A thumb hunted fiercely for his eyes. Pain lanced through his skull as the thumb found its goal.

Strong knew he couldn't stand there on the ladder and let himself be blinded. He twisted around, so that his side was to his antagonist, and yanked with all his strength.

The creature in the circle of light flew over his shoulder as Don Strong pulled him out of the mysterious window. He turned two complete somersaults in the air as he fell, whirling like some grotesque bird bereft of wings but still trying to fly. He hit right in the midst of the devil-worshipers.

"There's your devil!" Strong shouted. "Take a good look and see how you like him!"

An angry buzz answered him. The crowd seemed to swirl. He caught a glimpse of the devil-worshipers flying to the right and left as if something split a path through them. That was Stregel. He not only looked like a bull ape, he had the strength of one.

Strong saw him grab a man by the waist, lift him over his head and smash him on the floor. Never did a wrestler make more effective use of a floor slam. The man didn't move. Stregel's gnarled fist flicked out and caught another cultist on the point of the jaw.

"Give 'em the works, Don, my boy!" he was bellowing. "Rikki and me are coming yet!"

THERE was mad confusion in the temple of the devil-worshipers. Through that confusion, Rikki and Stregel were coming, Strong saw as he went through the circle of light. It was a good fight back there. He wished he could join in but he had another, more important thing to do.

Murky light swirled around his head and shoulders. Then abruptly

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he was through. The circle opened into a room. Strong expected to find his father there, but instead he caught a glimpse of a bewilderingly intricate machine. Three of the creatures with the pointed ears had been operating it, apparently. They were operating it no longer. Simultaneously they hurled themselves at the intruder.

Strong had hurled the first creature out, but they dragged him in. He struck at them but they swarmed over him. One arm went around his neck, circling it like a vise. He jabbed at the creature, felt his own arm grabbed, felt himself yanked. He knew he was falling.

Stars exploded in his brain when his head hit the floor. As quickly as they had come, the stars winked out. He winked out with them. It was the blow on the head that did it. It knocked him out—cold.

CHAPTER XI

Beyond the Temple

HE DIDN'T know where he was. "This is a nightmare," Don Strong told himself.

But he was certain he was in that curious state that lies half between waking and sleeping, in which it is impossible to distinguish what is real and what is the disordered activity of a sleep-haunted mind. Perhaps he was still on his trip into Maine, perhaps he was at home in New York. Where he was didn't matter. He would awaken presently and discover familiar scenes about him. Meanwhile this nightmare was interesting.

There were three of the men, only Strong wasn't quite certain they were men. They might be women. Their faces were beautiful, which made him think they might be women. Smooth, even skin, intelligent features—No, they weren't women.

The faces had something of the deep kindness that belongs in a woman's face, but there was also something that is almost exclusively male—a power, a knowledge, a sureness. They were bending over Don Strong; there was perplexed concern in their eyes.

So they were worried about him, these three strange men. There was something about their ears that vaguely perturbed Strong. What it was he could not exactly tell. Something—He watched them.

They conferred in whispers. One of them went away. Strong presumed this one went away, for a face swam out of his vision, leaving only two. Then the third face came back, and it seemed to Don Strong that gentle hands lifted his head.

He had the impression that a flat object about the size of a half dollar was placed behind each ear. The circular disks thus placed were warm. They tingled with a sensation that was oddly pleasant.

Only one face looked down at him now. The other two faces were gone. But they were somewhere near, he thought. He could hear someone moving near him, could hear whispered consultations. A faint throbbing commenced somewhere. The disks behind his ears grew warmer, producing a pleasant feeling.

Strong smiled at the face bending over him, to show his appreciation for that feeling of warmth. Again he saw the ears—pointed, flexible.

The sight was a warning bell clamoring in his brain. Pointed ears! Where had he seen pointed ears before? Where—A skeleton with icy feet went walking up his spine. Pointed ears! Danger! He struggled to sit up.

"Roumi—" a voice whispered soothingly. "Roumi—"

"What's that?" he cried sharply. "Roumi?"

The voice seemed to echo his word. "Roumi—"

The metal disks behind his ears throbbed with a delicious warmth.

"There is nothing to fear," something seemed to whisper. "Lie back down. There is nothing to fear. Roumi—" The whisper was oddly soothing.

"Peace—peace," it seemed to say. "All will be well—"

There was a hypnotic quality about it. Somehow, when the voice came

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it was hard to remember that pointed ears, in some incomprehensible manner, meant danger. Did they mean danger? How could that be? Whatever made him think that pointed ears were synonymous with danger? The idea was far-fetched. He lay back down.

"Sleep—" the suggestion droned into his mind. "Sleep—"

He slept.

WHEN Don Strong regained consciousness all memory of the nightmare was gone from his mind. For a second he lay still, trying to recall what had happened. Then his memory came flooding back. The temple of the devil-worshipers, the circle of light, the creature with the pointed ears—

He had been fighting three creatures who had pointed ears. The memory brought him to his feet, fists clenched, ready to fight again. He looked wildly around but there was no one to fight. He was in a small room and he had been lying on a stone bench. Apparently he had been brought to this place while still unconscious.

The room looked like—the padded cell in Dr. Renault's sanitarium! For a second fear shook him. Had he been taken back there? Then he sighed with relief as he saw the walls were not padded. Wherever he was, he wasn't in a padded cell.

The room was small, and with the exception of the stone bench, unfurnished. There was one large window. Automatically Strong went to it and looked out.

A dazed, bemused expression stamped itself upon his face. His eyes widened. There was awe on his face, and a growing fear, but mostly there was awe.

Meadowland stretched away, mile after mile, as far as the eye could reach. Low rolling hills, gentle undulations, like the rolling sweep of the western prairies. But unlike them, this land was covered with grass and dotted with shrubs, parklike. That was what it was—a vast park stretching away into infinity. Overhead was a cloudless sky—with two suns.

The awe in Don Strong's eyes deepened into fear. Two suns—His eyes left off seeing and his mind took up the task of rationalizing, explaining what he saw. And his mind balked.

He could, by a stretch of imagination, understand this vast park in which he found himself. While unconscious, he had been taken away from New York to some great private estate, the country home of some multi-millionaire. That would explain this perfectly kept landscape.

But it would not explain two suns. Nothing would explain two suns. The twin orbs in the sky balked his mind, stopped it cold.

Fragrant air swept across the meadowland, bringing with it soft scents, delicate odors, bringing also a faint pungence—ozone. In the temple of the devil-worshipers, Strong had smelled ozone. He smelled it here.

"I'm—I'm insane," he said huskily. "Dr. Renault was right."

His laboring mind had brought forth the explanation of insanity. But perhaps this was momentary hallucination, mere illusion. He demanded an explanation and his brain, attempting to understand what his eyes were seeing, found refuge in the suggestion that this was illusion, nightmare, the crazed creation of a fevered imagination.

What he saw was not, could not be real. Two suns—a world that was one vast park as far as the eye could reach It must all be a fantastic dream.

That was it his mind rationalized. He was dreaming. Presently he would awaken—

Down below him in the park he caught a flash of movement. A creature had come out from the shadow of a growth of shrubbery. It looked like a youth, a boy of nineteen, who has spent much time in the sun. His clothing consisted of a pair of trunks, nothing more; and his skin was brown.

He had pointed ears.

Strong watched, scarcely conscious that he was holding his breath. Another youth came from the shade, and then another, and still another, until there were seven or eight. Then abruptly they began playing some sort of game!

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STRANGE things come and go in dreams: weird monsters, impossible situations. But never before in one of his dreams had youths with pointed ears played a game in a park so big, it seemed to stretch away to infinity.

Don Strong could hear them laughing, calling to each other. They seemed happy and gay, and Strong was conscious of the desire to go down and join them. So bemused was he, so certain that he was dreaming, that he thought he could just step out of the window and float downward. That was the way one traveled in dreams, by floating.

But before he could step out of the window and float down, the youths stopped playing, stopped abruptly, and ran back to the shelter of the shrubs.

Not until then did Strong fully realize he was in a building of some kind. There were no buildings in sight in all that vast park, and in gazing out the window he had gotten the illusion that there were no structures of any sort anywhere.

It was an illusion that was destroyed when four other youths came around the corner of the building Strong was in and moved out into an open space in the park. They walked stiffly erect, their bearing was military. One of them carried two short knives and the other a length of cord. Obviously these youths represented an entirely different class in this strange world.

Don Strong wondered what they were going to do. He speedily found out.

It was a duel.

The ends of the length of cord were tied around the waists of two of the youths, leaving about four feet of cord to separate them. Acting on instructions from the other two, they pulled back, drew the rope taut. Then a knife was placed in the hand of each.

It was a variation of the extremely ancient duel to the death, in which two men are bound together to fight until one or the other drops.

Strong could see the two duelists clearly. Fear was mirrored on the face of one. The face of the other was wooden, showing nothing.

The duel commenced with a swirl of knives. Almost instantly it resolved itself into what was practically a wrestling contest. With his free hand, each youth seized the arm of the other that held the knife. Silently they strained, each striving to shake loose the other's hold and drive home his own weapon.

The youth with the wooden face leaped backward, jerking the other with him. At the same time he shook loose the restraining hand that held his own knife. The blade flashed as it streaked downward. The youth who had shown fear writhed aside and the knife sliced into his shoulder muscles. Instantly he caught the other's knife arm again.

Now they were locked together. Sweat was streaking their brown bodies. The one who had shown fear was obviously weakening. Blood from his wounded shoulder was rilling down his side. His teeth were bared in a snarl intended to be ferocious, but fear showed through the ferocity, growing fear.

The other youth was still wooden-faced, imperturbable, as though caught in the grip of an emotion so powerful that fear made no impression on him.

The end came quickly. The fearful one leaped backward, wrenched his knife arm free. But instead of striking at his antagonist, his blade flashed down—and up—severing the cord that held them together. Then he was running away as fast as his legs could carry him.

This creature had no stomach for the fight. He chose to run. The other duelist made no move to follow him. Wooden-faced, he stared.

The other two youths, apparently seconds, had taken no part in the fight. Nor did they attempt to follow the one who fled. An expression of disgust on his face, one of them reached down to the broad belt that circled his middle, drew something from it. He flung up his arm. There was a soundless puff of light.

Something sped silently with incredible swiftness through the air, struck the runner in the middle of his back. He screamed as he fell and he didn't move after he hit.

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THE duelist wiped the blood from his knife. Casually he and the two seconds strolled over to the sprawled, still figure lying on the ground. They studied it for a moment, apparently trying to make certain the youth was dead. The duelist kicked the sprawled figure in the side. It didn't move.

Without a backward glance they strolled across the park and went out of sight around the building.

When they were gone, the youths who had been playing came out of concealment and ran quickly to the silent figure on the ground. They examined the wounds, quickly discovering there was nothing to be done.

They stood dejectedly around, looking now at the body on the ground, now and then casting angry glances in the direction in which the triumphant duelist had vanished. Then they tenderly picked up the body and carried it away.

Don Strong took a deep breath. This was a grimly realistic dream he was experiencing—if it was a dream.

It was a dream. It had to be. It couldn't be anything else.

"Yah!" he heard a voice say. "It makes nuts, yet!"

Stregel's voice! It seemed to come from outside. Strong thrust his head out the window. He was in a low building made of stone, he discovered. Not ten feet away from him, Stregel was gazing out another window.

An amazed, incredulous I'm-darned-if-I-believe-my-own-eyes expression was stamped on Stregel's face. The burly scientist was minus a necktie and his shirt collar was torn almost off. One eye was ringed with purple and the nose looked as if it was permanently flattened.

"Stregel!" Strong yelled.

The scientist started. Then he recognized who had spoken to him.

"Don, my boy!"

There was a ledge a foot wide immediately under the windows. Strong easily walked along it and Stregel helped him into the other room. The scientist was beside himself with excitement.

"Devil-worshipers!" he was shouting. "Bah! Some ignorant lout does not know what is happening yet, so he thinks he is seeing the devil. Hah! It is a race of ignoramuses we are. An opening is made between two universes and some superstitious fool thinks it is the devil he is seeing!"

Don Strong heard the words but they made no impression on him. The thought that this was all a dream still held him. In point of fact, he would never quite convince himself that all the things that happened were not part and parcel of some fantastic dream, from which he would presently awaken.

Consciously he would know the truth; but the human mind is not so constructed that it can easily accept such concepts as worlds upon worlds, worlds without end, worlds that extend to infinity. The mind takes refuge in the comforting thought that the unknown is a dream. A reality that staggers the mind is more often than not rejected by the mind.

But—Stregel was real. There was no doubt about that. No doubt about

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the black eye and the flattened nose.

"I got them in the temple of the so-called devil-worshipers," Stregel explained. "Some fight that was, you bet. I was doing all right when bing! Somebody over the head with a club hit me. When I came to, I find myself here, in another universe.

"Hah, Don! Do you realize this is the most important discovery ever made by the human race? There *are* other universes! Minkowski, he was right. His mathematics said other universes ought to exist—"

The scientist was waving his hands and bellowing at the top of his bull-like voice. That he might be overheard did not seem to occur to him. That he and Don Strong were probably in no inconsiderable danger, he did not seem to recall. To Stregel, the only important thing was that in the temple of devil-worshipers, he had discovered another facet of truth. He had crossed at least part of the hill behind which reality forever hides.

"Are you sure?" Strong questioned him. "About this being another universe?"

"Sure? You bet I am sure." Stregel gestured out of the window and up at the sky. "With that, how can there be any doubt?"

HE was pointing to the two suns in the sky. Strong had already seen them. His mind had refused to accept the conclusion. There was still the possibility that this was on optical illusion, an hallucination. He had thought the circle of light in the devil-worshipers' temple to be a piece of stage property, and he was not yet convinced that this conclusion was not correct.

"How can I be certain I'm not dreaming all this?" he demanded.

Stregel spread his hands. "You cannot be certain of that, ever. No one can. All of your life a dream may have been. There is no way to know, for sure. That is the way nature guards her final secrets, by not allowing us to distinguish between real-stuff and dream-stuff."

Momentarily the scientist sounded sad.

"It is thinking I have been," he said. "No other conclusion can I reach, except that this is another universe." He gestured out the window. "New York, it is out there somewhere. You ask where?" He shrugged. "I cannot answer.

"A gulf is between us. If I knew how that gulf was constructed, the wisest man who ever lived I would be, yet. I do not know, but this much I can guess from what I have seen. Someone, in this universe, a method discovered of crossing that gulf. How far is it across that gulf? I do not know. It may be an inch, a million miles it may be.

"In that gulf, space is not the same as it is in our universe or as it is in this world. Distorted, it is, warped. Words will not tell about it; mathematics, even, will not describe it. It was crossed and a window opened into our universe.

"That window is—must have been—located inside a warehouse that had been abandoned. A watchman, perhaps, found it. To him it looked as if a strange circle of light hanging in the air was. A superstitious man, he honestly thought the devil had appeared to him."

All this was conjecture, Strong knew. Yet granting the hypothesis that they were in another universe, the conjecture did not seem far-fetched. Humans being what they were, the devil-worshipers would immediately conclude that the creature they saw in the circle of light was either a god or a devil.

Superstition would account for such a reaction. The men who discovered the apparition would be inclined to worship it.

"That ladder ought to have been a clue," Don Strong said, remembering the ladder the devil-worshippers had thrust up to the circle of light.

"Exactly," Stregel agreed. "Foolishness I thought was taking place, until I saw the ladder. Then I knew somebody meant business."

A few questions had been broached. The two outcasts knew, or thought they knew, where they were. In another universe. But each question that was answered opened other ques-

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tions. Where was Rikki? What had happened to Trait and to the girl reporter? What had happened to Don's father?

A sound turned them around. In the doorway stood one of the men of this strange world. His ears were flipped forward in a gesture unmistakably questioning.

CHAPTER XII

Zombar

THE man stared at them for a moment, surprise on his face. Then, with an oath, he crossed the room, pressed a button set in the window facing. With a loud clang, steel shutters slid over the windows, closing them completely.

Simultaneously the walls of the room began to glow with a soft, subdued light. Apparently the room was illuminated by some radioactive substance embedded in the stone of the walls.

The creature strode angrily to the door.

"Harli!" he called sharply. "Harli!"

"Yes, Lieutenant," a meek voice quickly answered from the hallway.

"You blundering fool!" the lieutenant shouted angrily. "Did I not instruct you to put the prisoners in these rooms?"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"Did I not instruct you to close and lock the shutters?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"Then why did you not obey my commands?"

"I—" The voice faltered. "I—I forgot, sir."

"You forgot! You idiot!"

"I'm—I'm sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

"I should say it won't! If it does, you may be certain I will report it to Zombar. You know what will happen then."

"Please, sir—" The voice was begging now.

"Such forgetfulness is but another indication of the degenerate weakness we are trying to stamp out," the lieutenant snapped. "If I have cause for another complaint against you, you may be certain what will happen."

He set forth, in no uncertain terms, what would take place. Don Strong and Stregel listened.

"Yah. Somebody is catching trouble," Stregel said. "*Herr* Lieutenant is annoyed because the shutters, they were not closed. Yah, that must be it. But I would give a pretty penny to know what he is saying."

Strong looked quickly at the scientist, to see if Stregel was pretending. Stregel was interestedly listening, but his faced showed that he had absolutely no comprehension of what was being said.

Don Strong swallowed. The fact had slipped up on him so quickly and so unobtrusively that he was not instantly aware of how phenomenal it really was. The conversation between the two inhabitants of this world was not in English. It was not in any language that he had ever heard before.

Yet he understood every word of it!

He knew what the lieutenant said to Harli, who was apparently a guard in the hall outside, and what Harli said in reply.

If Stregel was right, this *was* an alien universe! The customs, manners, habits should be different from anything known on Earth. The languages—if there was more than one—should not resemble any language spoken on Earth.

The words that Strong had heard were unlike any sounds he had ever heard before. In general they were soft and liquid, something like Spanish, but were almost entirely unaccented. As the fruits of an excellent education, Strong could read Spanish and French, and he could make some headway with Latin. He was no language expert though, and did not pretend to be.

But he understood this language! And he didn't know how he did it. The lieutenant berated the guard and Don Strong understood perfectly. He could even catch the undertones of meaning in the officer's voice, the arrogance, the pride. He could sense the fear in the guard's answers.

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WAS this—telepathy? He did not know much about telepathy, but perhaps the inhabitants of this strange world could transmit their thoughts. If this was true, why did they bother to use a spoken language?

Also, if the officer was using telepathy, why would he reveal so much to the two humans? He must know they would understand. But Stregel didn't understand. The sounds carried absolutely no meaning to him. Only Don Strong understood.

What madness was this? Or what miracle?

The officer finished dressing down the guard and turned back into the room, signing to the two prisoners to follow him. He led them out into the hall. The guard out there stood stiffly at attention. As they walked past, Strong had the impression the guard was covertly watching him.

The hall was wide, spacious and the walls ornamented with artistic carvings that even Praxiteles might have envied. Delicately carved figures, perfectly done in every detail; outdoor scenes so perfectly worked and colored that they gave the impression one was looking through a window at the scene itself.

Here were representations of the planet itself and the two suns above it in the sky, with long, wingless ships dropping down to beautiful cities. Roads curved through rolling hills over low, rounded mountains. Even Stregel, who normally had an eye only for puzzles of science, was impressed.

"Only a great race could have done such works," he said. "An old race, an old people. See those sky ships the artist has drawn. That means something. If we the chance have, some great discoveries may be made here."

Don Strong had seen the sky ships. He had seen also that the paintings and carvings were pitted and discolored in places. Apparently no effort was being made to repair them.

Several times, in the numerous corridors the two prisoners traversed, they met parties of the inhabitants of this world. They were all dressed the same, a pair of trunks and sandals being their only clothing. But there was this exception. The people here in this building, like the duelists wore leather belts in which were holstered a short knife and some small instrument, apparently the device that had been used to kill the duelist who had fled in fear.

They all walked with a military bearing and semed very busy about their own affairs, paying the officer and the two humans little attention except for occasional curious glances.

The guide led the two Earthmen at last to what was apparently an audience chamber. Five of the inhabitants of this world waited there. And one human. Trait, the pickpocket.

Trait was pathetically glad to see them. He seemed to be badly scared and at once edged unobtrusively toward them.

"You sure got me in a pickle," he said accusingly to Don Strong. "I knew I was stickin' my neck out when I took you to the hideout of them devil-worshipers. You gotta get me back to New York! I never agreed to come to any place like this. Where the devil am I, anyhow?"

The man was almost inarticulate with fear, his speech disorganized.

"Don't worry," Strong said. "You will be taken care of."

"I better be. You got me into this. You gotta get me out!"

"What happened to Rikki and Jean Sharp?" Strong questioned.

"How should I know?" Trait answered sullenly.

Then — "What are they saying?" another voice asked in the language of this world.

Don Strong understood the question. The person who had spoken was the only one who was sitting down. The others stood. Apparently he was the leader. His eyes were close-set and there was the look of a fanatic about him.

ONE of his retainers hastened to answer.

"It is difficult to follow their talk, Great Leader. They speak very rapidly and in a confusing idiom. Their speech is not at all definite. Apparently one sound can have any of

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several meanings—"

"No excuses, Zale," the leader snapped. "You have been studying their language ever since we discovered a way to enter their world. If you have not mastered it, I shall find someone who is capable of handling the task. What were they saying?"

Zale flushed. He proceeded to give a lengthy and almost entirely inaccurate translation of the conversation between Strong and the pickpocket.

"They were surprised to see each other," he said. "They greet each other. They are great friends. They inquire about the health and well-being of each other."

Apparently this translation satisfied the leader. He fixed Stregel and then Strong with a piercing gaze, and then turned to the officer who had brought them here.

"Where are the others?" he demanded. "I understood there were five intruders, including one female. Where are they?"

The lieutenant flushed. His tone was placating, almost whining.

"Great Leader, I am sorry to report that, due to the stupidity of one of the guards, the windows were left open and the other two escaped."

"Escaped!" The word was harsh with menace.

"It was not my fault, Great Leader," the lieutenant hastened to say. "I gave the proper orders but that stupid guard—"

"It was your responsibility!"

"The guard, sir, was to blame—"

"Can you not secure obedience from your underlings?" the leader roared. "It is no wonder we encounter such difficulties in the great task we have set ourselves to accomplish. Must I be forever plagued with weaklings and fools!

"I will investigate this escape personally, Lieutenant. If I find evidence of inefficiency on your part, you may rest certain that punishment will be sure to follow."

The lieutenant turned a milky white. He bowed and relapsed quickly into frightened silence. Like Trait, he tried to make himself as unobtrusive as possible.

The leader turned to the interpreter.

"Ask them what they were doing at the opening," he commanded. "I understand that they had entered the place by stealth. Find out if this was an accident or if they have gotten wind of our activities and seek to thwart us."

"Yes, sir," the interpreter said quickly. He turned to the three men. "What were you doing at the opening?" he asked them in a very bad accent.

"What we were doing!" Stregel roared, speaking English but little better. "What business is it of yours what we were doing there? We can go where we want. A free country, it is!"

STREGEL could easily be rubbed the wrong way. Instead of asking him about really important things, they were asking him foolishness. It made him angry. For he was keenly interested in the science of this universe, in its history, the discoveries that had been made here. He was interested in how this strange world was constructed, in the nature of the gulf that separated it from the universe from which the humans had come.

A million questions were tumbling over each other on his lips. What kind of metals did they have here? How did the metals differ from the metals of Earth? What were the physical laws of this universe, the chemical laws? All of them important questions, to a scientist. Stregel had eagerly anticipated being questioned. The scientists of this world would want to know about his universe. He would try to answer their questions. The result would be an amazingly intricate problem, one suited to his tastes.

He would be willing to sit down for hours, days—even years—in an effort to solve such mysteries. Instead they asked him nonsense.

"Foolishness!" he shouted. "Nonsense! Bring to me your scientists, your mathematicians. Them I will talk to—"

"Shut up!" Don Strong hissed warningly.

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HE UNDERSTOOD Stregel's annoyance. And the face of the leader of this people told Strong that while their words were not understood, the tone in which they were uttered was. They were utterly at the mercy of these people. It was no time for fine scientific frenzies.

Utterly aghast, Stregel stared at him.

"You too—"

"Let me handle this," Strong snapped.

"But the fools! They ask me a question that makes no sense. What difference does it make why we in the temple of the devil-worshipers were? Their wise men, I want—"

"A dead man won't be able to discover anything," Strong said pointedly. "And you'll be dead if you let that hair-trigger temper run away with you. These babies mean business, Stregel. You let me handle this. I've got an edge on them that they don't know anything about."

The edge he had on their captors was his ability to understand their language. Entirely unknown to them, these strange people had already revealed more about themselves than they would have preferred.

Strong did not have to guess how deadly their leader was. He knew. The language told him. And while the language had not as yet told him the sinister purpose operating here, it had given strong hints.

And—he had discovered how he knew the language. It was not telepathy. Far from it. It was—the nightmare! The strangely gentle faces that had bent over him, whispered to him, suggesting that he sleep.

How long he had been unconscious, he did not know. But during that period he had been subjected to an intensive course in education, all done by impressing information directly on his brain. It was not an entirely new process. The same idea had been used on Earth, in which a sleeper wearing earphones listens to phonograph records of a foreign language.

When he awakens, he may not immediately remember consciously the words impressed on his brain while asleep. But those words are lodged in his subconscious memory, and recalling them will be vastly easier than if he had never undergone the process. Sleep training.

Strong's nightmare had been no fantasy, no dream. He knew this now as definitely as he had ever known anything. The three figures whispering "Roumi—" had given him an intensive course in education. But—why had they done this Why had they helped him? And—who were they?

All this passed through Strong's mind in a flash. In another moment he had decided on a course of action. Calmly he faced the leader.

"We were at what you call 'The Opening' entirely by accident," he said smoothly, speaking in English.

He could have used the language of this strange world. But every time he thought of that, a warning bell rang somewhere in his brain.

"We went into a small shop to purchase some curios. The owner didn't seem to be in, so we went to the rear of the shop, trying to locate him. To our surprise, we found ourselves in a dark place where a number of men were gathered.

"When the opening appeared, we became curious and went to investigate it. We were attacked. Naturally we tried to defend ourselves."

He waited with bated breath while the interpreter translated for the benefit of the leader. Would it go over? Out of the corners of his eyes, Strong saw Stregel staring at him open-mouthed.

Of the two Earthmen, the scientist had the better mind. But it was a mind fitted to grasp intricate physical and mathematical relationships. In a place where survival depended on mental agility, Stregel would not have a chance. Realizing this, he looked his admiration at the younger man.

"Good boy!" he said. "Me, I am a fool who goes off from the half-baked potato."

The interpreter conferred with the leader, whose name, Don Strong gathered was Zombar. He watched Zombar's face, searching for an indication of the thoughts going on behind the

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leader's inscrutable visage. Thin-lipped, with a cruel nose and the eyes of a fanatic, Zombar's face showed nothing.

BUT Zombar seemed to be satisfied with the explanation Strong had given him. Possibly slightly doubtful, but in the main satisfied.

"Does any other person of their world know of the opening?" he questioned through the interpreter.

"I—I think not." Strong faltered for the first time. He was telling the truth now. Vehemently he wished it wasn't the truth. "Except the persons who were there in the curio shop, no one even guesses that your world exists."

This seemed to satisfy Zombar completely. Or did it? Don Strong wondered if this fanatic was merely leading them on, giving them an opportunity to betray themselves. It was entirely possible, Strong knew, that the creatures of his nightmare, the three who had called themselves "Roumi", had been Zombar's own men. In that case, the leader knew he could understand the strange language of this world.

Was Zombar tricking them? There was no way to find out, no way to guess at his purpose if he was.

"About this world," Stregel interposed. And—for him—his tone was humble. "We would like to know all about it."

The leader considered this request, his fathomless eyes studying Stregel as if the scientist were some strange insect impaled on a pin. Then he began to question Stregel, digging into the training of the scientist, into his knowledge. At the conclusion he nodded to the interpreter, indicating Stregel.

"This one is very wise. He may be of use to us. Question him carefully and report to me."

With a wave of his hand, he dismissed them. The interpreter and two guards led the prisoners to a small room. And there, during the process of questioning Stregel, Don Strong learned the history of this universe and of the world on which they now found themselves.

CHAPTER XIII

Flight for Life

THIS was the world of Sundra Unuum, the interpreter said. Here, in years long past the counting, a race had evolved and had grown to greatness, conquering their planet, achieving sky-flight, visiting the other three planets that comprised the system circling their double sun. The advancement of knowledge had been rapid, research into all branches of science had been encouraged.

"Those were the days of our glory," the interpreter sighed.

Something had happened then. The interpreter couldn't or wouldn't say what, but Don Strong got the impression that catastrophe had struck.

"The cursed Roumi—" the interpreter said.

Roumi!

Strong looked up. "What were the Roumi?" he asked.

The interpreter pointedly ignored his question. Instead he began to query Stregel.

"Yes," the interpreter said at last. "You can be of use to us, in the great task our leader has set—that of regaining our lost glory."

He seemed to become enthusiastic then. He explained the nature of the catastrophe that had come to Sundra Unuum.

"We became soft," he said. "Easy living robbed us of our will to greatness. There was nothing left to conquer—all problems had been solved. We had control of our food supply, and to a large measure we could control the weather of our world.

"We had even conquered disease. There were no wildernesses left, no jungles, no frontiers on which our youth could sharpen their wits. Decadence set in. With nothing left to strive for, we ceased striving.

"It is this weakness that our leader is trying to stamp out. He is trying to make us strong again, hard, as we were once, fit to survive. To that end we have begun educating our youth to dangerous living, that we may over-

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come this softness that is slowly conquering us, and become once again a great race."

The way the interpreter spoke, it sounded like a great plan. Here was a race, recognizing decadence, striving to lift itself by its boot straps and resume again its ancient heritage of greatness.

"Yah," Stregel said once, nodding his head vigorously. Then he said, "Nah," and shook his head with equal vigor.

A bemused expression stole over Don Strong's face.

"Your people must have visited our world," he said. "Yet apparently no one has ever seen one of your race on Earth. How have you managed to remain concealed when you were on Earth?"

"We rarely go to your world—yet," the interpreter replied. "When we first discovered how to cross the gap to your universe, a few of us went through.

"But it was dangerous. We did not want to reveal our existence yet, so we devised a way to secure information from your world without risk to ourselves."

"How did you work it?"

"Work it? Ah, yes, now I understand." The interpreter grinned. He thought this was very clever. "We captured two of your people. Unimportant persons, they were, so they were never missed. We experimented on them—ah—by dissection. We learned the function of their nervous systems, and devised a means by which we could control them."

"Hah!" Stregel blurted out. "How was this done?"

"The details, I cannot explain. Our wise men made compact rings. Hidden in the rings were tiny radio receivers and transmitters, each tuned to the nervous system of humans. When these rings were placed on the finger of a human, we were able to control his actions. He was completely under our power.

"Any orders we gave him, he had to obey. If we desired him to communicate with us, we sent out a radio order to the ring. He spoke to it, and we heard his answer. Clever, eh?"

STREGEL started to explode, then choked. Strong beamed at the interpreter.

"Very clever," he admitted. "But —"

"You are going to ask why anyone did not just remove the ring, thus breaking our control," the interpreter said quickly. "Ah, but once the ring was placed on his finger, it could not be taken off, except by our order. The man who wears a ring is powerless."

"No," said Don Strong. "I wasn't going to ask about that. I was wondering how you got the rings on men's fingers."

The interpreter fairly beamed.

"Ah, that was simple! We went again to your world, seized several of your people, again choosing unimportant ones who would not be missed. We placed rings on their fingers, putting them completely under our control. Then we gave them rings in turn, and told them what to do. That was all there was to it.

"If we wanted a particular man under our control, these men would approach and seize him. Before he even knew what was happening, a ring would be on his finger too. After that —pfttt!—he was in our power."

"Don Strong choked back the words he wanted to use. Instead he spoke casually, as if the matter was of little importance.

"And the ticking boxes, I assume, were radio relays?"

"The ticking boxes? How do you know about them?"

Instant suspicion showed on the interpreter's face.

"There were several of them in the temple of the devil-worshipers," Strong replied. "We saw them there."

"Oh," the interpreter said thoughtfully. "Yes, you could have seen them there." He nodded.

Strong took a deep breath and dared to relax. He suspected that one careless question, one thoughtless statement, would put them in danger. The interpreter seemed quite willing to talk—about certain things. But even in his boasting Strong sensed there was much he was holding back, much that remained untold.

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"Yah," said Stregel, nodding his shaggy head. "But the copper. Why did you the copper take?"

"Copper!" the interpreter gasped. "How did you know about—" He caught himself and his eyes narrowed. "Spies!" he spat out. "You were not at the opening by chance. You were there to spy upon us!"

He whirled to face the guards.

"Watch them carefully! If they make an effort to escape, destroy them. Zombar must hear about this!"

Slamming the door behind him, he hurried out of the room.

"Something wrong did I do?" Stregel was quite bewildered.

Don Strong spread out his hands hopelessly and groaned. "You spilled all the beans that time, Stregel. If we were what we claimed, passersby who had wandered into the temple of the devil-worshipers by mistake, we could not have known that any copper was missing on Earth."

"But I did not know—I was not sure—they had taken it." Stregel gulped unhappily.

"Who else could have taken it? Strong snapped. "It vanished from inside a locked, sealed warehouse. They must have located it, then opened a door from Sundra Unuum to Earth—a door that was *inside* the warehouse—and brought the copper here. I wonder—" A connection clicked inside his mind.

"I wonder if that was why they seized my father. He was one of the key men in the copper industry. I wonder if they seized control of him so they could force him to collect and store copper where they wanted it."

This was plain conjecture, without facts to back it up. But it seemed a logical conjecture. However, it left unanswered one tremendous question: Why would Zombar go to such lengths to assure himself of a supply of the reddish-yellow metal? Why did the world of Sundra Unuum have to steal copper from Earth?

BIG Stregel was still bewildered. "But Don—it makes nuts. One minute they tell us they are trying to become a great race; trying to revive science and learning and stamp out laziness and sloth. That is good. It is something I will help them do. Then, I mention copper, and the interpreter yells 'Spies!' It makes nuts, Donald."

"Of course it makes nuts," Don Strong gritted. "Because it *is* nuts, as you would say. When the interpreter was telling all the great things they plan to do, he was putting out the old malarkey. He was giving us propaganda, hot air. Don't you know a liar when you hear one talk?

"Don't you remember the way the lieutenant spoke to the guard who had carelessly left the window open? Do you recall how Zombar spoke to the lieutenant when he learned that Rikki and Jean had escaped?"

Strong was all steamed up.

"You saw that duel? You remember how casually they killed the duelist who lost his courage and tried to run? Those are facts, and the facts prove Zombar and his gang to be cruel and heartless. If you believe what *they* say, they're a bunch of fine fellows with no other object in life than to do good to their kind.

"That is what they want us to believe, Stregel. The facts point to an entirely different setup. Whatever is going on here, you can bet it's for the exclusive benefit of Zombar and his gang—and for nobody else!"

The scientist hung his head.

"Me, I am the fool," he said. "I do not think of such things. Into trouble I get us. I am sorry."

"Skip it," Don Strong replied gruffly. "It wasn't your fault."

He knew Stregel just didn't think in terms of good and bad. The scientist sought facts, and facts in the abstract are neither good nor bad. They are facts, and nothing more.

"But Don, what are we going to do?" Stregel asked.

"This!" Strong answered.

He was walking back and forth, pacing the room in which they were confined like a restless lion in a hated cage. The two guards here were watching him. At the order of the interpreter they had drawn their weapons. They watched the two humans but they saw no danger. They were armed. They didn't notice that each

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time Strong walked back and forth, he moved a little closer to them.

Smack!

It was the potent left jab, licking out with all Strong's strength behind it. His fist caught the nearest guard just under the ear. The fellow said "Glug!" He didn't know what had hit him. He started to fall.

Strong caught his weapon from him as it fell. Startled, the other guard was jerking up his own gun. Don Strong moved fast, faster than even he knew he could move. He spun the gun in his hands, pointed it, pressed the trigger, all in a single motion.

Light puffed from the weapon. The guard screamed, dropping his gun and grabbing at his hands. Where the discharge had hit them, they were charred lumps of flesh.

Strong grabbed the second gun from the floor, tossed it to Stregel. His own weapon he turned on the steel shutters that barred the windows. Droplets of hot metal spewed out. He kicked the shutters aside, looked out on the world of Sundra Unuum.

"Come on!" he yelled to Stregel and Trait. "We're getting out of here!"

It was a twenty-foot drop to the ground. Trait drew back nervously.

"We'll kill ourselves if we jump out of here," he protested.

"So what?" said Stregel. "If we stay here, worse things than the chance of a broken leg will happen to us."

Thereupon the scientist thrust himself through the window, launched himself down. He hit on the grass, crumpled, rolled like a ball. A second later he was on his feet, waving at them.

"Come on! The grass is soft."

TRAIT'S face turned a greenish yellow.

"Go on!" said Don Strong fiercely. "And when you hit, start running for that clump of trees."

He pointed toward a dense growth of trees perhaps half a mile away. The pickpocket leaped. Strong started to follow him. The door of the room opened. One of the guards stood there, the fellow the lieutenant had called Harli.

He took one quick look around the room, his eyes widening in amazement. In the window he saw Don Strong. Strong saw him at the same time, but the Earthman was not in a position to use his gun.

He was trapped. He clung to the edge of the window, trying to turn himself so he could bring the gun into action. He could jump, but to jump now would be fatal. From the window the guard could pick all three off with ease.

"Jump!" the guard said, in his own language. "Run for the trees. I'll shoot but I'll miss."

"Huh?" Don Strong did not believe his ears.

"Jump!" the guard harshly repeated. "There is not a second to lose. Zombar is coming. He is going to put the radio rings on you, force you to tell what you know. After that, you will be destroyed."

With the strange words ringing in his ears, Strong jumped. He hit the ground with a thud. Stregel yanked him to his feet, then turned and pointed his gun toward the window.

"Hah!" the scientist exclaimed. "One is poking his head out!" He started to fire.

Don Strong knocked the weapon aside. A streak of throbbing light blasted into the side of the stone building as the shot went wild.

"But from the window he will shoot us," Stregel protested.

"No, he won't," Strong said. "I don't have time to do any explaining, but he's a friend. He won't shoot us. Now run for the trees!"

Trait was already running. The pickpocket was halfway to the shelter of the woods. Stregel and Don Strong started after him. A streak of humming light lanced past them on the right.

"He's shooting!" Stregel was panting as he glanced back toward the building they were leaving.

"Yes, but he's not trying to hit us. Run!"

Again the humming beam of light went past them, this time on the left. A furrow of smoking, blackened grass remained to mark where it had passed.

The lethal ray throbbed over their

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heads, whistled past them on the right and on the left. It came so close they could feel its heat in passing. But it missed. Panting, they flung themselves into the shelter of the trees.

"Harli is a good shot," a calm voice observed in English. "A pity he wasn't shooting at you."

Two forms loomed up among the trees. Don Strong took one look at them.

"Rikki!" he gasped. "Jean!"

"Yep," Rikki observed, grinning. "Welcome to the green woods and to the merry band of Robin Hood. I wish I'd had a stop-watch on you," he continued irreverently. "I bet you set a world's record in the quarter mile."

CHAPTER XIV

The Escape

NOW that they were away from it, Don Strong could see how large was the bulding in which they had been held prisoners. It was a huge thing, stretching away for miles into the distance. Not one bulding, but many, were connected together by a stone wall, forming a vast enclosure that resembled a huge fortress squating close to the ground.

Through a door at the ground level a dozen figures surged. They came running toward the clump of trees. Others appeared in the window from which the three humans had escaped. Faint cries came across the gently rolling ground.

"A little game," Rikki observed, watching the group coming toward them. "Hare and hounds. We play the part of the hare."

Rikki looked tired and wan. Death was advancing across that meadowland toward them, and he knew it. So he grinned. Everything was a game to Rikki, to be played lightheartedly. Or with the pretense of lightheartedness.

Jean Sharp looked dazed.

"How did you two get here?" Don Strong asked.

"They left the window open and we skipped," Rikki answered. His eyes followed the nearing figures. "Time to be going," he said. He led them out of sight through the trees.

The clump of trees was not a mile across. Strong knew they could hide in it for a time. But not for long. They would be hunted down, no matter where they hid.

A bronze figure rose up to meet them. It was one of the youthful inhabitants of Sundra Unuum. An enemy! Strong jerked his gun up.

"Easy," Rikki said. "He's a friend. I can't understand what he says but he's on our side."

"How do you know?"

"He and his friends have been taking care of Jean and me," Rikki replied.

He gestured back toward the squat fortress, then pointed at the three other humans with him.

The lad nodded. Don Strong could not be sure, but he thought their guide was one of the bronzed youths whom he had seen playing games from his window. He led them swiftly through the trees, following a path apparently visible to him alone.

"Hah!" said Stregel. "He seems to know where he is going."

"He does know," Rikki declared. "Wait and see. There are more tricks in this grove than you could count."

Beside a gigantic tree the youth stopped. Carelessly he pressed against the bark.

A section of the wood slid aside, revealing a dark opening. The youth thrust his head inside and whistled. Instantly three others came piling from the hole. Their guide spoke swiftly to them, then turned and pointed to Strong, Stregel and Trait, meanwhile making motions.

"He says to take off your clothes," Rikki said. "That's what he means by those funny motions."

"Take off our clothes?" Strong repeated. "Why?" He addressed the question to the bronze youth, using the language of Sundra Unuum.

"So my three comrades can put them on," the youth explained. "Then they can lead Zombar's men astray. At a distance they will think they are following you—" A startled expression came over his face and he

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stopped speaking. "How do you know our language?" he demanded.

Before Strong could answer a shout sounded in the distance.

"You can explain later," the youth said quickly. "Now there is no time to be lost. Quickly. Change clothes."

Strong hesitated. The hounds would hunt three people dressed in human clothes, all right. But what would happen when they caught up with the masqueraders and discovered they had been tricked?

"Don't worry," Rikki suggested. "They know these woods. They'll lead Zombar's boys a merry chase and then disappear into some hole. The idea is to get the hounds away from here. Go on. Change clothes with them."

IT took only a few minutes, Jean remaining in the background. Then the three youths, clad as Earthmen, slipped away into the trees. A fierce shout told that they had been discovered. Swiftly the shouts concentrated toward the right, then went moving off into the distance.

The bronzed guide motioned his charges to enter the hole in the side of the tree. The humans filed in and the door closed behind them. Steps led downward. Another door was opened and they entered a large room. Dozens of the bronzed youths were here. The walls glowed with the same soft illumination used in the fortress, clearly lighting up the scene.

"Quite a joint they've got down here," said Rikki. "They found us hiding in the woods and brought us down. I gather, from what I can make out of their language, that they don't like Zombar. But he is much stronger than they are, so they have to hide out.

"Here's the leader of the bunch." He gestured toward one lad who had risen and was approaching. "His name is Quintus, or something like that."

Quintus was a tall, well-built youngster. Like all the others, he seemed to be about nineteen or twenty years of age. Smiling, he came toward them.

Don Strong held out his hand. Quintus took it. Simultaneously the guide who had brought them to this subterranean chamber shouted,

"Seize them! They're spies!"

The smile went off Quintus' face like a drawing erased from a slate. The grip of his hand tightened. He jerked forward, pulling Strong off balance. At the same moment somebody hit Strong's feet in a diving tackle. He went down as hands clawed at him.

He tried to get to his feet. Hands grabbed his arms, jerked them behind his back. Dazedly he heard Stregel bellow, caught one glimpse of the scientist trying to fight his way out of a tangle of bronzed youths. Rikki, Jean Sharp and Trait were also on the floor now.

Don Strong felt the ray gun jerked from his hands. These youths had no weapons but they knew what to do with this one. Strong found himself looking straight into the gun's muzzle. Stregel was staring into the other one.

"What the devil—" Strong swore.

"How do you know our language?" Quintus questioned curtly. There was no smile on his face now.

"What difference does it make?" Don Strong answered angrily.

Around him his companions were getting to their feet.

"What gives?" Rikki questioned. There was a bewildered expression on his face.

"Yah!" Stregel grunted. "What is this foolishness? Did we walk into the spider's trap?"

"They want to know how I learned to speak their language," Strong explained impatiently.

Rikki lifted an eyebrow.

"Well, for that matter, how did you? It wasn't one of your accomplishments when we left our beloved homeland."

"I—" Strong hesitated. How much should he tell? How much could be safely told?

"Better make it good," Rikki advised, nodding toward the bronzed youths who were grimly waiting. "These lads have lived through some tough times, and they're kind of hard to get along with."

"But I'm no spy!" Don Strong protested. "You know I'm not."

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"Sure, I know it," Rikki agreed. "Quintus is the lad who doesn't know it. He's the one you have to sell."

The conversation had necessarily taken place in English. Strong turned to the leader of the Sundra Unuum youths.

"The Roumi," he said defiantly, "taught me how to speak your language."

HE had decided to stick to facts. The truth was so fantastic that he doubted if it would be believed; but he couldn't lie. He didn't know enough about this strange world to fabricate a convincing falsehood. A skilful liar has to build on a solid foundation of fact, and Strong didn't have enough facts at hand.

If he lied, Quintus would speedily trip him up. By telling the truth, he had a chance. A slim one, but a chance.

"Three of your people who called themselves Roumi," he repeated, "came to me while I was held prisoner by Zombar. They taught me how to speak the language of the world of Sundra Unuum."

Quintus merely stared at him. Strong's first fleeting impression was that the other had not understood. No change showed in his face. Nor did any change show in the faces of the other youths clustering around them. But—all noises ceased. All the little shuffling sounds of shifting feet and moving bodies went into silence.

Quintus swallowed. "Did—did you say Roumi?" he questioned.

"Yes. I know the whole thing is fantastic, but so help me, it's the truth. I thought I was having a nightmare, and even now I'm not sure it wasn't all hallucination. But one thing is certain—after my nightmare I could speak the language of Sundra Unuum."

Quintus continued to stare at him. Not a muscle moved in the bronzed face. But Don Strong saw that the eyes were widening. The silence continued. Strong wiped sweat from his face. Had he said the wrong thing?

In his nightmare he had been warned about revealing the fact that he could speak the language of this world. But he had thought the warning had referred to revealing that fact to Zombar. These youths were enemies of Zombar, which theoretically should mean that he, Don Strong, was among friends.

"The Roumi—" Quintus said.

There was reverence in his voice, and awe. As if his words had broken a spell, other voices began to speak.

"The Roumi—"

"They live."

"No. No. That is not possible."

"But if the Roumi spoke to him, they *must* live."

"It is incredible. The last of the Roumi died long centuries before we were born."

"We are not even certain they ever lived!"

"Legends, myths. The Roumi never really lived. They are only a myth from the past."

"But we cannot be sure they are a myth!"

Thus the voices of the bronzed youths, speaking to each other, arguing, doubting. They looked from Don Strong to his companions, and then at Quintus, to determine what their leader was thinking.

Strong held his breath. He was an alien in a foreign universe. How strange he and his companions must seem to these people! Would not Quintus decide that the sensible thing to do would be to take no chances whatsoever?

"Here is a stranger. Let us take no chances. Let us kill him," was an old law on Earth. Would not the same law apply here?

"Tell me everything that happened," Quintus said.

Strong told the whole story, everything that had taken place since he entered his father's office and found a stranger there. It was a long story, and Quintus and his companions listened with growing amazement. True, they already knew Rikki and Jean, but they had not been able to talk to them. They could talk to Don Strong. They made him tell the story of his nightmare over twice.

"The Roumi—" said Quintus musingly.

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THE youth had not relaxed his guard nor had his suspicions been lulled. What he was thinking Strong did not know.

"What are the Roumi?" the Earthman questioned. "I know nothing about them."

"Gods!" said Quintus.

"Gods!" Strong gasped.

"Yes. Our gods of the old time." Quintus' keen eyes searched the other's face. "We call them gods now, but our legends say they once lived here among us. Our legends say that it was the Roumi who made our world into heaven—a place where there was no hunger and no cold; a place where we lived in mutual friendship; a place of peace.

"After our world was so ordered, the Roumi withdrew and went to some secret place, vanishing from sight. That was thousands of years ago, so long ago that their doings have become legend. In the city which Zombar holds are records that the Roumi are supposed to have left.

"No one knows whether they really did leave them or not. No one knows whether they ever really lived or not. Only one thing is certain—for many centuries the Roumi have been gone from our sight."

"But actually they are not gone," Don Strong said stubbornly.

He recognized in the Roumi what seemed to be the early scientists of this race, the wise men who had worked wonders.

"They appeared to me," he declared. "I saw them."

"That, Earthman," said Quintus, "is what we wonder. Did they really appear to you? Did you really see them?"

"I—I think so." Strong faltered. A cold chill went up his spine at the thought. Had the gods of this strange world come to him in dreams, teaching him the language? What did it all mean?

"Because you say you 'think' so, because you have not tried to lie to us, we are giving you the benefit of the doubt," Quintus said.

Now he smiled again and the smile went the rounds of his bronzed companions.

"We accept you—on probation. You and your comrades, Earthman. Because, if your story is true, it seems that the Roumi have come from their secret place to aid us against Zombar, curse him!"

His clenched fist rose. Instantly the bronzed youths lifted clenched fists above their heads.

"Curse Zombar!" the shout rang fiercely around the underground room. "Curse him for what he is and what he tries to do!"

There was bitter anger in the shout. Don Strong wiped the perspiration from his face. He felt a little better now, a little safer. Somehow, he knew, these youths were their friends. He asked them about Zombar.

"In your world you would call him a dictator," Quintus replied. "Here there was peace and happiness, until Zombar became ambitious. We had no rulers, nor any need of them, nor did anyone seek to rule, until Zombar. But his ego was warped. He wanted power, personal power.

"He went around saying that we were decadent, that we had lost our strength, that we were becoming weaklings. There are fools among us, those who are not very intelligent. They listened to Zombar.

"Gradually he acquired a following, gained power. Then he seized the city where you were held prisoner, declared himself to be ruler. He established a program. 'Be hard, live dangerously: thus you will be strong.' He gives us a choice of joining him—or being destroyed." The youth's voice rang with resentment.

"I am sorry," Don Strong said simply. "It is a terrible thing, what this tyrant has done. What chance do you have of overcoming him and his henchmen?"

"Little, now," Quintus admitted. "He holds the city. There in vast armories are stored the weapons that our race used in older times, before we had learned not to need weapons. Guns that throw beams of light, ships that fly, ships that will fly out across space. We cannot hope to fight against these weapons now."

"Why 'now'?" Strong challenged him.

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QUINTUS' voice fell.

"Because you have brought us bad news," he said, and his face was sad. "Zombar held the weapons, but he could make little use of them. In our world was almost none of the metal essential to their operation, the metal of power.

"The ships that fly, even the heat guns such as you took from his guards, were all powered by one metal—copper. We had thought we were safe. There is almost no copper on our world. It is our rarest metal.

"This is why you bring us bad news. You tell us that Zombar has secured from your Earth a vast amount of copper."

Copper! Don Strong's mind reeled as he at last saw the purpose back of all Zombar's plotting. It was copper that this dictator of Sundra Unuum was seeking. And it was copper that he had taken from Earth! The power metal of Sundra Unuum!

There was more to be discussed, but it would have to wait until later. The people of Sundra Unuum might be able to keep going forever, but Earthmen had to rest. Strong made the suggestion to Quintus.

"Of course," the young leader said. He led them to another room. Rough bunks were built around the walls.

"Hm-m," said Jean Sharp, surveying the sleeping accommodations. "This is definitely not the Ritz."

"What do you care?" said Rikki. "You never knew any better."

"If them thar words were the truth, I'd scratch your eyes out," the girl snapped.

She climbed into the nearest bunk and was asleep almost before she laid her head down. For that matter, so were her companions.

CHAPTER XV

Attack on the City

DON STRONG awakened to the pressure of fingers on his shoulder. Quintus was bending over him. The face of the leader was grave.

"Awaken your comrades," he said.

They were already awakening, Trait, his face yellowish with sleep, Rikki, Jean Sharp, Stregel. Quintus led them to an adjoining room where there was water, then brought them food, a slightly acid fruit that was strangely satisfying to the pangs of hunger.

After eating the three Earthmen retrieved their clothes from the three youths who had returned after acting as decoys for their escape.

"Ask Quintus what's up," Rikki said to Strong. "He couldn't look any more solemn if he had swallowed an owl."

The face of the youthful leader was strained with lines of worry.

"I awakened you because you will no doubt want to see our attack," he said, in answer to Don Strong's question.

"Attack?"

"Yes. Within a few minutes we will begin attacking the city which Zombar holds. Do you wish to watch?"

At their eager nod, he led them to the surface. Soft night lay over the world of Sundra Unuum. Overhead strange stars twinkled in an infinitely distant sky, brightening the darkness of the night.

The woods was a place of shadows, hushed and watchful. The two suns of Sundra Unuum were on the other side of the world.

Quintus led them toward the edge of the clump of trees. A soft challenge shattered the stillness. Quintus answered it and the watchful sentinel passed them. Two bronzed youths, apparently lieutenants of Quintus, joined the little party as silently and as unobtrusively as shadows.

From the shelter of the woods, the city which Zombar held was visible as a dark blotch against the ground. Sprawling over many miles, it lay asleep.

"There are watchers on the walls," said Quintus. "But we hope to gain entrance by surprise."

There was a rustle in the trees near them. Strong glimpsed a group of youths moving forward from the protection of the forest. They walked quietly but boldly for a distance of

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perhaps a hundred yards, then dropped to the ground and began to crawl toward the fortress. Indistinct in the halflight, they resembled a long snake moving slowly toward its prey.

"But they're armed with knives and clubs!" Strong protested. "How do you expect to win a victory with such primitive weapons?"

"Knives and clubs are all we have," Quintus answered somberly. "And we had to make them with our own hands. We have no other weapons. Except in the armories of our ancestors, all of which are located within Zombar's city, there are no weapons on this planet. We thought we had outgrown the need for them," he ended wistfully.

Clubs and knives against a deadly ray gun that threw off a bolt of flame hot as white steel!

"But you don't have a chance!" Don Strong choked.

"We know that," said Quintus. "Our only hope is in surprise."

"But can't you wait until you are stronger? Do you have to attack now?"

"Waiting is the one thing we can't do," the youth replied. "We have waited too long now, considering the best plan. Now we know Zombar has copper. As soon as his technicians can mold it into the forms used by the weapons in the armory, he will have so much power that we cannot hope to overcome him.

"The fact that Zombar has secured copper from your world forces our hand. We must attack, because each day he will grow stronger. Ah! The signal!"

FROM somewhere in the halflight that shrouded this world there came a whistle. Shrill and keen it floated through the air. Another whistle answered it, and another, and then the quiet air was alive with sound. Whistles echoed away into the distance, dozens, hundreds of them.

Simultaneously, there came a roar of voices, hundreds, thousands of voices, lifted in a single shout—the battle cry of the bronzed youths of Sundra Unuum!

Fiercely the cry roared through the still air. Then the charge began.

To the little group of humans, crouching at the edge of the forest, it seemed that dark masses sprang up from the very ground. Starlight on this world was as good as moonlight on Earth. Dark bodies rushed rapidly toward the grim walls of the fortress city. The distance was too great to distinguish individuals. But they could see masses rushing and scaling the walls.

"Sweet Pete!" Rikki murmured, awe in his voice. "Talk about the 'Charge of the Light Brigade'—they had nothing on these boys!"

Don Strong felt a thrill at the sight. Masses of bronzed youths charging stone walls! That took courage, especially when the attackers were armed with nothing more effective than knives and clubs. The fierce battle cries rang through the night.

"Wouldn't it be better if they were silent?" Strong asked anxiously.

"No," said Quintus tensely. "The noise has a purpose—to confuse the defenders, to make them think they are beset by an overwhelming horde of fighters, to make them afraid. The men who serve Zombar, in spite of their training, know in their hearts that they serve an unworthy master.

"Because of this knowledge they are cowards. Their own fear will be a weapon against them."

Lights were appearing on the walls now as the startled garrison sought to see what was going on. The notes of warning trumpets came floating across the space that separated the city from the forest, summoning the defenders to battle.

Surprised, angry shouts could be heard within the city. And from the wall, fingers of throbbing light, brilliant in the dusty darkness, began to reach down to the attackers. Screams of agony echoed back from the places where the lights struck.

"Why aren't we in that fight?" Strong gritted. "Do we have to stay here and watch?"

Don Strong came from earth. Behind him was a long heritage of battle. He belonged to a race that had often tried to forget war, but had never

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succeeded, as the inhabitants of the world of Sundra Unuum thought they had.

"I should say so!" Stregel echoed. "Should we stay here and watch, when there is work to be done?"

"Be quiet," Quintus ordered them. "You are few. Your presence will not turn the conflict either way."

Messengers were coming to him, panting youths bringing news of the fighting, runners with reports of how the battle went. The bronzed youths not only lacked weapons, they did not have modern methods of communication. No doubt this strange world had possessed them at one time, but it had turned its back on progress.

"Quintus, we took them by surprise!" a runner shouted, breathing hard.

"Quintus, we are over the walls near the big gate!" another exclaimed.

"Carry on," Quintus ordered stoutly.

The battle was going in their favor! Other runners came panting up now.

"The first group is within the city!"

"Quintus, we have made a breach in the walls and are pouring through!" another youth reported.

QUINTUS sent them running back toward the city, carrying his orders. They had breached the walls in places. Elsewhere they had gone over them, using long ladders to give them a lift up. And from the forest, reserves were coming. They were pouring in massed ranks across the open plain. The vault of the skies was alive with the sound of their battle cries.

"I dare hope," Quintus said hoarsely, "that we will win."

Here and there searchlights were flaring on the walls, illumining the scene below. Defenders were clustering around the searchlights, bolts of death striking outward as they fired mercilessly into the masses below. A wave of attackers, already on the walls, charged one searchlight, fighting hand to hand. Abruptly the light went out.

Lights were flashing within the city now, popping up all over it, as its defenders came to life, rushing from their quarters, to go down beneath the charge of the bronzed youths of Sundra Unuum.

"We're winning!" Quintus shouted. "Our surprise attack worked! They never had time to organize!"

It seemed incredible but it was true. Darkness still lay over the scene, hiding much from view. But the last searchlight was gone from the walls, and apparently most of the defenders. Not many of the light guns were winking downward now. And reserves were still moving up, still springing out of the clumps of trees and charging toward the city.

Abruptly a streak of fire leaped up from the city itself. It blasted into the air like a gigantic rocket, rushed on a long slant upward until it was high in the air, then spun in a circle.

Quintus' voice was suddenly tense with fear.

"A ship!" he shouted. "Zombar's men had time to arm one ship from the armory. Watch out!"

The ship had turned. The flare of light that had marked its appearance had died down. Now its position was marked only by a dim radiance springing from its tail. It was moving down.

"Back!" Quintus shouted at his men.

Too late!

With a roar the ship came rushing through the air. Down, down it came, until it was a bare hundred feet above the ground. A beam of light leaped out from its bow, spread into a fan, plunged into the dark mass of reserves moving up.

The night was alive with a vast throbbing note, a tremendous humming, a growling roar of sound. Like a knife the light cut through the wave of attackers outside the walls.

Where it touched the ground, flame leaped up.

It was the same kind of weapon as the hand guns, except that it was mounted on a ship, and therefore tremendously more powerful. In a split second, the battle cries that had been resounding with victory turned to screams of pain. Death ran through the ranks of the attackers.

It was only one ship, a small, tear-shaped thing. It wasn't big enough to hold more than five men. Arrayed

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against it were uncounted thousands of attackers.

If there had been millions, the result would have been the same. Knives and clubs against an airship—there was only one answer.

CHAPTER XVI

Within the City

YOUNG Quintus was almost in tears.

"We're licked," he said bitterly. He and his two lieutenants crouched at the edge of the trees. The five Earthmen were with them.

Night still lay over the world: the halfdarkness, halflight of Sundra Unuum. Near them was stillness, broken by the occasional coughing groans of dying youths. Skirting the edge of the woods, the ship had passed here—

There had been panic. The youths of Sundra Unuum knew they could not fight against the ship. They had run. There was nothing else to do, no other hope. And as they ran, the ship had moved among them, flying not fifty feet above the ground. Slaughter, worse than slaughter had devoured their ranks.

The ship was in the distance now. The night air brought the sound of far-off screams mingled with the throbbing note that accompanied the operation of the sinister weapon. The ship moved slowly, hovering. Apparently some device that warped gravity kept it in the air. Death spouted down from it as it grimly went about its business of extermination.

Lights were beginning to appear on the walls of the fortress city. Over there, Zombar's guards, recovering from the disorder attendant upon the surprise attack, were beginning to function again.

The tense little group crouched in the shelter of the trees. No more runners were coming to Quintus now with reports. If they had come, there was only one report they could have made. Quintus was sobbing now unashamed.

"I wonder," said Don Strong thoughtfully. "The big attack has failed. I wonder if a small party might succeed where a big group would have no chance."

"What do you mean?" Quintus asked, knuckling fiercely at his eyes.

"This. We cannot fight Zombar and his men. They are too many for us. But if we could enter the city by stealth, we might seize Zombar. He has guards, of course. But if we fell upon them before they knew we were near, we might overcome them."

"It's a desperate chance," said Quintus.

"I know. But it seems our only one."

"We'll take it then," the youth declared bravely. He rapped out an order to his lieutenants. "You wait here," he said to Strong.

"Oh, no," said Don Strong. "We're going along."

"But this isn't your fight. And—we don't have a chance, and we know it. Why should you commit suicide just because we are?"

Strong's eyes blazed and his jaw hardened.

"Oh, yes, this is my fight!" he snapped. "I haven't forgotten that somewhere over in that city is my father. What do you fellows say?"

He turned to Rikki and Stregel and explained what Quintus was going to attempt.

"Shall we go with him or shall we stay here?"

"Are you mad?" said Rikki, disgust in his voice. "What a question! Of course we go."

"Yah!" Stregel chimed in emphatically. "A good fight works up the appetite."

"Not me," said Trait nervously. "I'm not any good in a fight like that. Besides, you're just sticking your necks out so somebody can cut them off for you."

"Okay," said Strong shortly, fighting to conceal his disgust. "You stay with Jean. If we win, you can bring her into the city later. If we lose, do the best you can, whatever that is."

"Hey, wait a minute," the girl protested vigorously. "Why should I be counted out on this party?"

"Because you're a girl," said Rikki

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gruffly. He flicked a questioning glance at Trait. "A girl would be of no help in a fight, and only in the way if we have to run. Sorry, sis. We like your courage but it's no dice. You stay here and knit."

Rebellion showed on her face. She stamped a foot.

"Men!" she snorted.

"Sorry," said Don Strong. "But that's the way it is."

THEY left her and Trait at the edge of the trees.

"I'm going to have to speak to Trait," Rikki said slowly. "He's a disappointment to me."

"No need to be disappointed," said Strong flatly. "Some people just fold up in a crisis."

"You're telling me," Rikki declared. "I could go into an utter collapse right now."

There were six of them: three Earthmen, three of the bronzed youths of Sundra Unuum. The ship was still in the sky off to the left. But it was a mile away, so far off that the night breeze scarcely carried the pitiful screams that went with it. Quintus led them at a dead run, straight toward the walls of the city.

"There is a secret entrance," he said, panting. "Harli has been using it to go and come. It's just big enough for one man at a time, so we didn't try to send a squad through it during the main attack."

They crossed a stretch of burned grass. The ship had passed here, leaving this broad, charred ribbon of death behind. In spots the grass was still trying to burn. An oily smoke filled the air, clogging the nostrils. Strong stumbled over something, cursed and choked. The reek told him what he had stumbled against. A body! There were others.

"God!" Strong heard Rikki say. He knew that Rikki had also stumbled over a memento of Zombar. And it took a lot to shock Rikki Walsh.

"Quiet!" Quintus hissed. "We are near the walls. This way."

They were across the blackened ribbon of charred grass. The walls of the city loomed before them.

From the walls a searchlight suddenly flashed.

"Down!" Quintus shouted.

It was a command that was not needed. No sooner had the light come on than all six threw themselves face down on the ground.

The beam of light came fingering toward them. It was nothing but light, not one of the lethal projectors. But Zombar's men were clustering around it. If the searchlight revealed anything suspicious, the projectors would be used.

Don Strong dug his face into the grass, scarcely daring to breathe. The light moved toward them. It was on them. The beam stopped.

If both the suns of Sundra Unuum had been in the sky, the illumination would not have been as bright. Had they been seen?

"Don't move," Quintus whispered. "There are other bodies around here. They may think we're dead."

The intolerably brilliant glare blazed down over them.

"I wish they would turn dot thing off, or shoot!" Stregel muttered. "Such a business on the nerves is no fun."

"It's not sporting to shoot us while we're flopping on our bellies," Rikki added. "They ought to flush us first, like quail."

"Shut up!" Strong hissed. "You darned fools—"

Death was hovering over them, waiting to pounce. Rikki and Stregel didn't care, outwardly. It would take something stronger than the prospect of immediate death to suppress the irrepressible Rikki.

Death passed them by. The searchlight beam lifted, went sweeping off for whatever else it might find.

It found something! A group trying to flee from the city. Death immediately got to work as the searchlight crew beamed down the victims their light had revealed.

BY THE time the shooting was over, Quintus had shoved aside a certain block of stone. One at a time, six people had dived into the narrow opening thus revealed. They came out inside a deserted room at ground level.

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"Well, we're here," said Rikki. "Though I'd hate to make a bet that we will get out again."

"Do you know your way around inside this place?" Don Strong asked Quintus a bit apprehensively.

"Of course."

"What chance do we have of getting some of those hand projectors? Do you know where they're kept?"

"They are kept under lock and key, and issued only to men whom Zombar is certain he can trust. I've already planned how we can get some of them, by overcoming the guards to whom they were issued."

The scheme sounded foolhardy, but it was quite simple in operation. Posting his two lieutenants and the three Earthmen just inside a door that opened into a corridor at ground level, Quintus deliberately stepped out into the open. He was seen instantly. He dodged back inside as if he were attempting to escape.

"Get ready! Four of them are coming!"

They were brave, those guards. They were only chasing a man who was armed with nothing but a knife. *They* had projectors. It would be such fun to sizzle this brazen rebel as he tried to flee! Or, if he tried to hide, it would give them great satisfaction to root him out and turn on him a projector set at low intensity. He would die more slowly then.

The guards came rushing through the door, kicking it open with a clatter and a bang.

Quintus and his lieutenants had knives. They used them. Don Strong and Rikki and Stregel had fists. They used them too.

The guards had been expecting to find a single youth fleeing like a frightened rabbit. Instead they found six very angry antagonists. The fight didn't last long. It didn't really get started. The guards were taken completely by surprise.

"Four projectors!" Quintus exulted, wiping the blood from the blade of his knife. "The gods are good to us tonight."

"Next," said Rikki, hefting a projector to get its balance, "we go call on Mr. Zombar. I think I'll get my draft board to kill my four-F classification when we get back to New York. This fighting business is a bit of all right!"

It took them over an hour to reach their goal. They had to proceed with extreme caution. If entering the fortress city had been dangerous, being in it was triply so. Quintus led them by a circuitous route, keeping always to little-used passageways, never venturing into the open.

The city in reality was an immense hive. Now it was an alarmed hive, its frightened and enraged occupants diligently searching for intruders. Twice the little band was almost surprised by searching parties. They had to duck into unused rooms and wait there with bated breath while guards went hurrying by.

In what would have been the east on Earth, the sky was beginning to lighten. The first of Sundra Unuum's twin suns was due to peep over the horizon at any time now. Now and again they could hear the airship, passing outside the city. It was still being used to sow death among the luckless youths who tried to flee.

"Zombar will be in the audience chamber where you saw him," Quintus whispered. "From there he will be organizing the defense and ordering the search. We are now approaching his audience chamber. Make no unnecessary noise."

In single file they slipped into a narrow and apparently little-used passage. Quintus led them to a door at the far end. With infinite caution, he pushed the door open a crack and looked in.

It was Zombar's audience chamber. He was there!

The dictator of Sundra Unuum was within their reach! The key, the nerve center of the whole hideous blotch that had spread its cancerous growth over the face of paradise, was within their power. A rush, a single massed charge, and they would have their man.

THERE were only five guards in the room. Runners were constantly arriving, but they stayed only long enough to make their reports, receive orders and dash out again.

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The messengers posed no problem. And the guards could be blasted down before they knew what struck them.

Zombar was pacing back and forth. A person whom Don Strong recognized as the interpreter was trotting along beside him. They were carrying on an animated conversation, interrupted only by the appearance of the runners.

"Ready?" Quintus called softly.

His two lieutenants answered in fierce whispers. Strong saw Rikki glance at him.

"Luck," said Rikki. "This is it."

"Yah!" Stregel spoke firmly. "Luck!"

The scientist had refused to accept one of the projectors. Instead he had found a heavy club, exactly suited to his bull-like strength.

The lips of Quintus formed the command "Charge!" It was a command that was never spoken.

A scurry of running feet sounded in the passageway behind them. A disheveled, battered figure came running toward them. Quintus, whirling, brought up his projector.

"Don't go in there!" a voice cried at them, in English. "It's a trap!"

Strong barely had time to knock the projector aside. The figure came toward them. He saw who it was.

"Jean!" he gasped.

Curses rumbled in Rikki's throat.

"I thought I'd never find you!" the girl gasped. Her clothes were torn and there was an angry bruise on her cheek. "Trait — Trait slugged me! He decided his best chance—was to throw in with Zombar. He tried to get me to go with him—and when I wouldn't—he hit me.

"The last I saw of him—he was surrendering to a group of guards. He meant to make them take him—straight to Zombar—so he could get on the good side of the dictator—by betraying you—"

For an awful moment, there was silence. Then Rikki cursed again. Don Strong swiftly translated what the girl had said. Quintus' bronzed face whitened.

"Maybe Trait hasn't had time to get to Zombar yet," he said.

"The devil he hasn't!" Strong gasped. "Look!"

Perhaps the slightly opened door had betrayed to the watchers within that the moment for which they were waiting had arrived. The audience chamber was suddenly swarming with guards. They were coming from everywhere. Two doors to the room had suddenly been flung open. Armed men were dashing in. Guards were springing up behind screens.

Zombar had left off his pacing to stare from frightened eyes at the slightly opened door. For the first time the would-be attackers saw his full face.

He wasn't Zombar! He was someone dressed in the dictator's clothes!

Quintus slammed the door.

"Run!" he shouted.

CHAPTER XVII

The Shadows

DON STRONG and Rikki and Stregel had more than played tag with death since the mad moment when they had entered the world of Sundra Unuum. Now they must play it again. Rather, they must continue the same grim game.

It was not a game that could long continue. All the chips were down, the blue chips, the red chips, the white ones, and the last card was coming from the hands of the dealer.

The passage that led to Zombar's audience chamber was short. They were through a door and out of it before the guards could get through from the audience chamber.

Alarm bells were ringing over the whole city. Their brazen clamor penetrated here. Whistles were shrilling. If the whole hive had been alert before, it was doubly alert now. Zombar, with the information the treacherous Trait had given him, had improvised an almost perfect trap.

"We'll have to hide!" Quintus said, panting.

His face showed that he was without hope. Perhaps they could hide—for a few minutes. Maybe they could hide for an hour. But in a place that

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swarmed with enemies, they would eventually be rooted out.

At a dead run, the bronzed youth led them through the intricate maze that was the city. And then, racing through one final door, they were out in the open.

Don Strong's first thought, with a gasp of relief, was that they were outside the city. Then he saw they were still within the grim walls. They were in a small open space, with a ruined building in the center. Trees and shrubbery gave it the appearance of a small park.

"I didn't mean to bring us here," Quintus whispered, looking around. "I—I lost my way." His gaze fastened on the ruined building in the center of the open area. "We'll hide in the old temple. Maybe they won't think to look for us there."

"I'll give you three to one they will think of it," said Rikki. "They like to play dirty."

The sky was bright with dawn as the little band slipped furtively through the shrubbery and into the old building. It was a huge place. Vast columns, pitted and worn, supported the roof. The interior was dark.

"We will have at least a chance to defend ourselves here," said Quintus, shrugging even as he spoke.

Four projectors against the thousands that Zombar could bring to bear on them!

"What is this place?" Strong asked.

"In the old days, it was a temple of the Roumi," the youth replied. "It has not been used for a long time—perhaps centuries."

"What do we do?" Rikki wanted to know. "Hole up here and if we're not discovered, make a sneak for the outside tomorrow night?"

"That's the general idea," Strong answered.

He knew it wasn't a good idea, because the temple was one single vast room, with no place to hide, the columns supporting the roof offering the only place for concealment.

The designers had not intended to build a place of refuge for hard-pressed fugitives. There was no altar, nor furnishings of any kind. But it was the only choice they had. Death was searching relentlessly for them in the surrounding city.

They heard the search going on. The first sun of Sundra Unuum came up over the horizon. The pearls of the dawn sky gave way to the brighter lights of day, illumining the city. A burst of shouts came through the dawn air.

"They're prying the lid off hades, looking for us," Rikki said, nodding toward the buildings surrounding them.

Rikki was lying sprawled on the marble floor. He was behind a column, as were all the rest.

"Yah." Stregel nodded his agreement. "Too bad it is that we have to fight, to kill each other. In this world are many things to be learned." The scientist sounded sad.

"They've pried your lid off!" Strong exclaimed suddenly to Rikki.

A SINGLE fierce shout had sounded from a building near them. Looking up, they saw a watcher on the roof. The watcher was pointing toward the temple.

Simultaneously the air throbbed as the beam from a projector came searing down. It flashed against a column, puffed into blinding light, went out. The watcher on the roof yelled again, then stopped yelling and screamed.

Abruptly the scream went into silence. Something streaked downward against the face of the building, thudded against the ground.

"That's one good German," said Rikki calmly.

He had rested his projector against the column, fired one single throbbing beam of burning light.

"Good shot!" Don Strong shouted at him. "I'm afraid it came too late, though. Listen!"

Another chorus of shouting had burst from the building on which the watcher had been standing. Faces popped up in front of the windows, hands pointed excitedly toward the temple.

"Yep," said Rikki. "They've found us. Well, it will be a merry fight—while it lasts. And if I may paraphrase the words of a better man than

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I am, I suggest we withhold our fire until we see the tips of their pointed ears."

The time was not long in coming. Apparently most of the guards had misunderstood the death of the roof-top watcher, or had not seen it. Thinking their quarry was armed only with knives and clubs, they came rushing from the building.

Summoned by the whistles of their leaders, they popped up from everywhere. They were the hounds, bugling in for the kill, now that the hare had been run to earth. Across the open space, straight toward the temple, a group of at least fifty came at a headlong run.

Zombar had offered tremendous rewards for the death of the rebels who had attacked him. Each of his men was eager to earn his share.

They didn't fire their projectors as they charged. They were a hundred feet away—fifty—twenty-five. Shouting like demons, they came on.

Out from the temple sprang four beams of throbbing radiance. Four gigantic fists smashing into the massed attackers would not have had a more devastating effect. The beams screamed across the short distance, struck the oncoming guards, blasted holes in their loose ranks, tore among them.

From the physical standpoint the effect was terrific. From a morale standpoint the effect was more than that. It was terrifying. The guards had anticipated no resistance. Instead they found they had run headlong into a barrage of biting death beams. The hare had teeth, the hare could bite! The shock of that discovery struck terror among the attackers.

For an instant the charge held. Its own momentum carried it forward a few faltering steps. Then—it broke! Screaming as the throbbing beams tore among them, the guards stopped running toward the temple. Their sole interest lay in getting away from this horrible place, as fast as they could.

Like thieves pursued by avenging demons, they turned and ran, those who could run, to vanish into the nearest building.

Shocked silence hung over the city.

"We stopped that one!" Rikki shouted. "Hey! What the devil—Get back here, you crazy female!"

A figure had dashed from the temple. It was Jean Sharp. She was running straight toward the buildings where the guards had gone.

"Have you gone crazy?" Don Strong shouted. He and Rikki leaped to their feet, started after her.

HAD the girl lost her senses? Death was waiting out there. Within the space of seconds, beams would be pouring from every window of the surrounding buildings.

Before Strong and Rikki could reach her, she had stopped and began snatching at the ground. Bodies were strewn on the turf all around her. The charge of Zombar's guards had been halted at the spot where she now stood.

Then she came running back toward the temple.

"Nobody would give me a gun!" she shouted at Don Strong and Rikki. "So I had to get one for myself."

Her arms were full of projectors. She had rushed forth and snatched the projectors that the guards had thrown away when their charge had been broken. As nimble as a deer, Jean slipped behind a protecting column, slid a projector toward Stregel, another toward the lieutenant who was without a weapon.

Don and Strong and Rikki leaped back behind a column. "Hm-m," said Rikki thoughtfully, his face getting red. "I guess I kind of underestimated that girl."

"I guess we did," Don Strong agreed, his own face even redder.

Havoc broke loose now from the surrounding buildings. Strong glanced across at Jean. The girl was lying behind a column, calmly firing around it. She looked up, caught his eye on her and scowled.

"Man!" she declared vehemently. "It takes a woman to get things done."

"Oh, yeah?" Strong snapped, blushing anew at the implication.

"Shut up, you two," Rikki interrupted. "The devil's broken out of the paddock."

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Chaos was really loose. The charge of the guards had failed. Now the guards knew that their quarry was armed. There would be no more charges. Instead there would be a closing ring of relentless fire pouring from every window, from every rooftop.

The fire began to come. The first sun of Sundra Unuum was above the buildings now, pouring down its full brilliance over the city, clearly revealing the scene. The temple was no longer a place of darkness. It was a place of light. Some of the light came from the sun. Most of it came from the throbbing beams that were frothing down into it.

Quintus got up, slipped across the room, took up a position behind one of the columns there. The temple was built in a circle, the columns forming the outer perimeter. The defenders arranged themselves so that they could cover all approaches.

Beams dug into the columns in blazes of light, showering droplets of red-hot stone. Beams fingered between the columns, gouging into the floor.

Don Strong tried to make himself as small as possible, to keep the thick bulk of the columns between him and the death that was raging so close. This is the end, he told himself. Now is the time come. A gurgling scream sounded somewhere near. He looked around.

The lieutenant to whom Jean had given a gun had exposed himself too much. The whole side of his head was gone. Blinded, crazed with pain, he leaped to his feet, slapped at the agony in his face, stumbled out into the open. A dozen beams converged upon him at the same time. His body became a single burst of livid flame.

A roar of exultation went up from the surrounding buildings.

Don Strong caught a glimpse of Zombar directing his men from a rooftop. Trait was with him. Strong tried to get in a shot, but the dictator and the pickpocket slipped quickly out of sight.

The attack burst with new fury. The very air of the temple was becoming heated. Suddenly, on one side of the temple, the attacks stopped. The beams quit frothing against the columns. The constant shouting from the surrounding buildings died into silence, then came again as a surprise buzz of sound.

"Hello! Something's up!" Rikki called.

STRONG cautiously thrust his head around the column. At first he could see nothing. Zombar's men were leaning over the edge of the roof, looking down. Others were peering from the windows. They seemed to have lost all interest in the occupants of the temple. They had stopped shooting. Strong could hear them calling to each other.

"What is it?"

"Where did that thing come from?"

"What does it mean?"

There was awe in their voices, and beginning fear. They were staring at something on the ground, something that Don Strong could not see.

"It came out of the building below us," one of the guards called.

"Look! There is another one!" a second excitedly added.

"What's happening?" Strong called to Rikki.

"I can't tell— Ah, there it is. Between the shrubbery. Something coming toward us."

Following the line of Rikki's pointing hand, Strong saw it. Something! His pulses jerked at the sight. It was —it wasn't like anything he had ever seen before.

It was a purple shadow. It looked like an elongated bubble with one end on the ground. Taller than a man and bigger, it seemed more like a shadow than anything else. It was alive with color, purple ranging into ultraviolet. Little sparkles of incandescent light were running over it.

It moved slowly, but surely, straight toward the temple. It seemed to flow along the ground. There was no doubt as to its destination. It was coming toward them.

Following behind it was a second one, an exact duplicate. And as Strong watched, he saw a third move out of the building and join the weird march toward the temple.

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CHAPTER XVIII

Gods of Sundra Unuum

RIKKI was the first to react.

"By gad, they're ghosts!" he shouted.

In all the years Don Strong had known him, this was the first time Rikki had ever sounded scared.

Three of the purple luminescences were coming toward them. No more had emerged from the buildings.

A heavy silence hung over the city. The humming beams of the projectors were silent. Hundreds of guards, forgetful of the danger of exposing themselves, had popped up at the windows and were staring at what was happening down below.

"Destroy those things!" a hoarse voice shouted from the roof.

It was Zombar's voice. He was pointing at the purple shadows moving across the park below.

Not a guard moved to obey his orders.

"I said to shoot!" he screamed.

He jerked his own projector from its holster, aimed and fired. A beam of throbbing light drove down, plunged into one of the shadows. Plunged—and was absorbed. It had no effect.

The shadows kept moving.

Zombar screamed at his men to shoot. This time they obeyed him, two or three at first, then dozens, then all. Again the air was hideous with the howling noises of the projectors. Light beams poured down.

Unavailingly!

The shadows did not seem to know that incredible torrents of energy were pouring into them. They kept moving, flowing across the ground.

"They're coming toward us," Rikki called nervously. "Shall we shoot?"

"No!" Strong shouted. "Wait."

The purple bubbles, gleaming with fluorescing ultra-violet lights, came up the steps of the temple, moved between the columns, halted. Abruptly, the gleaming purple faded. Like smoke blowing away before the wind, revealing what has hitherto been hidden, the bubbles cleared.

Don Strong gulped. He heard Quintus scream. A single word came from the lips of the bronzed youth.

"Roumi!"

The bubbles had cleared to transparency. Inside each of them was—a creature of the world of Sundra Unuum. Strong recognized them instantly. The old faces, the kindly faces, the deeply thoughtful, inward-turning eyes, the eyes that seemed to say "Peace." The three creatures of his nightmare were inside the bubbles. Roumi—

The gods of Sundra Unuum!

Zombar's men, on the walls, did not see the clearing of the bubbles, did not detect what was inside. Projector beams were turning the temple into a maelstrom of commingled light and roaring sound.

Each of the three Roumi was carrying what looked like a small box. Projecting upward from each box was a slender rod that looked like an antenna. The rods were about six inches long, ending in a tiny ball that seemed to be of crystal.

The Roumi glanced at the death beams throbbing through the temple, looked at each other, nodded. One of them moved a tiny knob on the box he was carrying.

Don Strong felt a tingling sensation pass through him. It was gone as quickly as it came. The only impression he had of it was that something had passed through his body, passed at tremendous speed.

ABRUPTLY the throbbing of the projectors droned into silence. Strong looked around. A purple shell was extending across the interior of the temple. It was being generated by the box carried by one of the Roumi. Dimly, Strong could see through it. On the outside, the projector beams were flashing. They weren't getting through. They were being absorbed. Dazedly Strong knew what had happened.

From that tiny box, the Roumi had extended a force-field around them, besieged little band, protecting them from the projectors in the hands of Zombar's men.

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"Roumi!" The cry from the lips of Quintus.

Then the bronzed youth and his remaining lieutenant flung themselves across the temple, to kneel at the feet of the three gods who had come in the bubbles of protective force.

The Earthmen did not kneel. Jean, Rikki and Don Strong drew together to stare at the Roumi. Stregel stared too, but not at the gods of this world. The Roumi had set the three boxlike generators of the protective curtain on the floor.

Only one of the generators was being used. Stregel disregarded the Roumi completely. He squatted on the floor and began to examine the generators.

The Roumi might be gods of this world. But Stregel wasn't interested in gods. He was interested in the generators. He wanted to know how they worked. One of the Roumi squatted beside him. Stregel looked up and saw him. The scientist grinned, pointed at the box and asked a question. The Roumi nodded. The scientist blinked.

"Hey, Don, my boy," he said, looking around. "They can read minds. I asked him a question and he answered. Telepathy!"

Before Strong could answer, Stregel had turned back to the Roumi. Questions began to pour from his lips. Havoc might be raging outside the protective curtain. Stregel didn't care. For the first time since he had entered this strange world, Stregel had found somebody who could answer his questions.

Presently—

"It was long ago," one of the Roumi said. "We thought we had achieved the goal of existence."

He was old, old. Ages had unreeled before his eyes, here in this world beyond the sky. He was like Ulysses, who had seen much and achieved much, both on the ringing fields of Troy and afterward around the then-known world. A reform Ulysses, of the universe of Sundra Unuum.

With the exception of Stregel and the third Roumi, the little group clustered close around the two inhabitants of this world who had been—and possibly still were—gods. Awe beyond understanding was on the face of Quintus. Even Rikki looked disturbed.

"We belonged to a group of seekers," the Roumi Ulysses continued. "It was a cult, a secret society, devoted to furthering the interests of our people. There was war in our world in those days, and war was wrong, so we began the task of eliminating it.

"We found war often started in hunger, in want, in deprivation. Before we could stamp out the evil, we had to stamp out other evils. We had to make Sundra Unuum a world without hunger, without want, without cold—"

The old voice sighed. The dim eyes lit again with a new luster as memories of the old days of achievement came back.

"It was a task that required centuries. To it we devoted hundreds of years, the group renewing itself by adding new members as the old ones died. And working in secret, we succeeded!"

Fire flashed in the old eyes now, the voice rang strong.

"Hunger was an evil. We eliminated hunger, made certain there was food enough for all. Cold was a danger. We set up devices to control the weather, devices that still function. Disease destroyed our people. We eliminated disease.

"World-wide education was needed. We established it. And the day when the weapons of this world were stored all in one vast museum, as relics of a hideous past that we had outgrown."

Some achievement, that! Don Strong felt a thrill at the words. Heaven! Here the Roumi had created heaven!

BUT something had happened in this heaven. It was no longer paradise. The beating of the throbbing beams of death against the protective field of force proved that Eden was Eden no longer.

Ulysses of the Roumi sighed. "We were wrong. We did not know it then, but we were wrong. We thought all the problems of Sundra Unuum had

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been solved; that our people, living in paradise, could be expected to become angels. This was an error. Sooner or later a Zombar was certain to come, shouting catch phrases, winning converts.

"We did not know that this would happen. The Roumi, who had always been a secret society—having, as we thought, solved all the problems of Sundra Unuum—retired from the affairs of our people.

"We were seekers after truth, and truth has many facets. We went into secret places, we built hidden refuges, we became so secret that we forgot an outer world existed."

Forgetfulness; The Roumi, seeking truth in hidden laboratories, had forgotten their own people.

"It was not until recently, when certain events forced the matter to our attention, that we remembered. Then we came forth, those of us who still remained to keep alive the ancient search for truth, and discovered that Zombar had come."

Ulysses looked at Don Strong. "We discovered that Zombar's technicians had found a way to enter another universe, that he had brought people from a foreign world to Sundra Unuum. That is when we came to you, Don Strong, passing into the city through routes long forgotten.

"We gave you a knowledge of our language, so that you could discover the danger both you and Sundra Unuum faced. We hoped you would be able to devise a method of defeating Zombar, a task we shrank from attempting ourselves."

The voice lapsed into silence. The throbbing beams had ceased beating against the protective curtain.

"Go out now O Roumi and destroy this scourge," Quintus pleaded. "After Zombar has been dealt with, come again and lead us!"

To Quintus, these creatures were gods, all powerful, all mighty. They had come unharmed to the temple, walking through a barrage of destructive radiation. They could walk out into the open. At a wave of their hands, the city would fall down. With a twitch of their little finger, Zombar would be destroyed.

At a nod of their heads, the suns of Sundra Unuum would cease to shine. If they willed it, the ground would become smoke to be blown away by the wind. They were gods. They could solve all problems. And the time of Zombar's destruction had come.

"Your belief is great, my son," the Roumi Ulysses said wistfully. "Would that it were founded in fact!"

Quintus looked dazed. "You mean —you can't overcome Zombar?"

Ulysses shook his head. "No!"

"But—but you came here. The projectors were without power to harm you. The shields that you set up keep death from us now." His voice was wild. "Surely—"

"You do not understand. These shields are something we hastily devised, using what little we remember of the old arts."

Quintus' voice was desperate. "But if you can't destroy Zombar by yourselves, call for aid! There are other Roumi. Surely they will come to help!"

"There are no other Roumi," Ulysses said. "We are the last. The society ceased seeking new converts, ceased adding to its ranks."

"But—"

"Zombar has all the weapons, my son. Zombar has the power. Our shields will hold off his hand projectors—for a time! Also, you do not understand. We thought there was peace in the world. We thought there would always be peace in Sundra Unuum. Long long ago we ceased seeking after engines of destruction.

"We have no weapons. We did not think weapons would ever be needed in this universe."

WITHIN the space of seconds, while he made this admission, the Roumi Ulysses seemed to age perceptibly, to grow older, as though the heart was going out of him, as though the admission of failure drained the last of his strength away.

The Roumi had come. The gods of this world had shown themselves. They had a means of defense, the purple shields that turned the rays from the hand projectors. But of weapons,

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the means of offense, they had nothing!

They were not gods. They were old men, weary men, who had thought that peace meant that weapons would never be needed.

Only Zombar had the weapons!

"But why did you come to us, if you cannot help us?" Quintus wailed.

"For two reasons. We are the Roumi. We are held in awe here in this world. We came to you so we could go out and reveal ourselves to Zombar and his men. Because we are Roumi and because his men hold us in superstitious awe, we hope to cause his adherents to rebel against him. Our second reason in coming to you—is to die with you if we fail."

Their plan was simple. And desperate. If gods appeared among his men, Zombar might easily find himself faced with revolt. It was a plan that stood an excellent chance of succeeding, for the reason that the force-shields, turning harmlessly away the beams from the projectors, would strike terror among Zombar's guards. They would think their weapons were useless.

Gravely, with no show of emotion, the Roumi prepared to quit the temple, to walk forth into the park.

There was a humming in the air. It did not come from a projector. It came from overhead. Looking up, Don Strong caught a glimpse of the airship. It had returned from its work of destruction among the fleeing rebels.

The Roumi saw it too. Now, for the first time, terror showed on their faces.

"Zombar has one of the old ships in the air!" Ulysses gasped. "We did not know—"

"What difference does that make?" Strong asked quickly.

"What difference? Much! Our shields will turn the beams from the hand projectors. But against the much more powerful beam that the ship carries our shields will fail."

The shields had been hastily improvised. They were purely defensive. And they would not stand up against the infinitely powerful radiation that would blast downward from the ship.

There was silence in the temple. Quintus looked as if he had heard his death sentence, as indeed he had. Don Strong was aware that Jean Sharp was clinging to him.

Only the Roumi seemed calm. For a moment, terror had showed on their faces. It was gone now. Strength had replaced it.

"It seems we came to die with you," Ulysses said. "There is no time to cause Zombar's men to rebel. Well—death is not such a bad thing. Our research indicates that there is something beyond death. What, we do not know; but something. It will come quickly, and easily, and afterward there will be no regrets."

He was old and death mattered little to him. It was of no more importance than the turning of the next page in some book he was reading. There would be something written on the next page, he knew.

Over the whole city was a vast hush. And then suddenly Stregel was shouting.

"It makes nuts! Who says we have no weapons? Who says we are about to die? It makes nuts, I tell you!"

All the time the others had been talking, Stregel and the third Roumi had been squatting on the floor, carrying on an animated conversation of their own. The main topic of conversation seemed to be the generator. Now Stregel was hastily disassembling one of the boxlike devices. And shouting at the top of his voice.

"No weapons! Hah! I will show you a weapon that *is* a weapon!"

CHAPTER XIX

Stregel's Mathematics

STREGEL, with his long arms and barrel chest and fierce face, always looked like a bull ape about to run amok. Now, squatting on the floor, tearing down one of the generators, casting quick glances up from his work to the tense little group that surrounded him, all the while rumbling strange gutturals deep in his

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throat, he resembled a medium-sized gorilla smashing a toy.

But—he was doing something no simian ever did. He was talking in mathematical symbols.

"Rikki!" he yelled. "In this world they know something of the math! Never have I met a man who knew more math than I did—until I met him!" He gestured toward the Roumi with whom he had been talking.

"So what, you blustering colossus?" Rikki snorted. "What the devil do we care about numbers when that thing is getting ready to turn us into cinders?"

Rikki jerked an eloquent thumb over his shoulder. Somewhere up there was the airship, maneuvering into position over them. They could hear it rumbling in the sky.

"Pouf!" said Stregel. "It is nothing."

"It will be *pouf* to you, if you don't do something! When that ship turns loose its stinger you will *pouf* into smoke. If you've got something fella, give out!"

"I am coming to giving out," said Stregel.

And while he talked he worked, his fingers moving with incredible dexterity among the coils and bits of crystal that the disassembled generator had revealed.

"That purple curtain, she is a force-field. Our friends, the Roumi, were very smart in creating it. Yah, a lot of knowledge it took to build a generator to set up a protective force-field.

"What the Roumi did not know, because they have thought of peace so long that they have forgotten how to think of war, is that their protective force-field could also become of offense a most powerful weapon!"

Stregel nodded emphatically. To him, the words meant something. They meant far less to Rikki.

"What *are* you talking about?" he demanded.

"Steel!" said Stregel, in explanation. "Back on Earth we build the tanks, the battleships. It is the steel we put on them, as armor, to protect them. Inches of steel on the tanks. On the battleships, maybe the steel is two feet thick in spots. The steel plate is protection, it is defense."

"I don't get it," Rikki muttered.

"You are dumb!" Stregel exploded. "Out of steel, we make armor plate. If we wish to make a projectile to shoot through the armor plate, what do we use? *Steel!* The strong metal, she is both the means of defense and of offense."

He took time out from his work to jerk a huge thumb toward the purple shell that surrounded them.

"The curtain, she is like the steel. She protects us from the hand projectors. But, just as the steel can be made into cannon balls, the curtain can be changed into a projectile, into a cannon ball that we will hurl outward—a cannon ball of projected force. Now does what I am saying make nuts, hah?"

"Great grief!" Rikki gasped. He beamed at Stregel as if this bull ape was his own child. "It makes no nuts, my friend. It makes much sense!"

Stregel nodded. "It will make more sense when I convert one of these generators, so it no longer sets up a protection around us but hurls a cannon ball of force where we desire it to go."

The scientist quit talking and continued working. He was changing the coils and bits of crystal in the generator, working with fevered rapidity but with deft sureness. And—the three Roumi squatted beside him and began to help.

THEY got an idea fast, those three old creatures who had been gods. Once the idea was brought home to them, they were quick on the mental pickup. The only thing that had ever been wrong with them was that their thinking was grooved.

They had thought only of peace, the Roumi. When peace was threatened, they thought only of defense, of something to keep the wolf away—not of a weapon with which to go out and shoot the wolf.

Stregel came from another world. He could think of defense and offense. He jarred the Roumi out of their groove. And, he talked in terms they could understand, the one universal language—mathematics.

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Now that their thinking ran in a new channel, the Roumi knew how to help. Age went away from the face of Ulysses. Eagerness lit his features, lights gleamed in his eyes. He was no longer an old god, watching his world come down in ruins around him, taking him with it. He was a new god, a fighting god, tasting the delights of battle.

Don Strong was still skeptical.

"Does Stregel know what he is talking about?" he asked Rikki.

"To be frank, I don't know," Rikki answered. "But I'll bet on him. If he says something doesn't make nuts, the chances are it makes the soundest kind of horse sense."

"He better hurry."

Somewhere overhead, hidden by the roof of the temple, was the sky ship that Zombar had brought from the armory of the past. They could hear it throbbing in the air. Outside, beyond the shimmer of the protective curtain, Zombar's men could be seen on the roofs of the buildings. They were watching.

Zombar had summoned this ship to crush the rebels who dared defy him. It would destroy the fools who hid in the temple, just as it had destroyed the other fools who had tried to attack the city.

The roar of the ship lessened almost to silence. It was hanging over the temple.

Brrrroum!

The air groaned with the burden of the sound it carried. Unseen by those within the temple—the roof shut off their view—but plainly visible to those without, from the nose of the ship there stabbed downward a living beam of throbbing light.

Brrrroum! A throbbing roar, ghastly, hideous, blasting through the bright air of the Sundra Unuum morning.

Dripping with incandescent droplets, a hole appeared in the roof of the temple. The beam drove through it, smashed downward, sputtered and ate into the marble of the floor, then winked out.

The crew of the airship was firing at random. They only knew the rebels were hidden in the temple. The first shot missed.

Stregel and the three Roumi worked on. If they heard the smashing roar, if they saw the ravening light, they gave no sign. They were rebuilding a generator.

Brrrroum!

Again the beam come down. Stregel and the Roumi worked on.

Brrrroum!

A part of the roof came down. The whole building rocked, swayed on its foundations. A choking dust arose.

Stregel never seemed to notice.

"Is it finished?" Don Strong shouted. He seized the scientist by the shoulder, shook him.

Stregel finished one final connection.

"Yah," he said, looking up. "Except for testing, it is finished." He glanced dazedly around at the fallen stones. "Have they been shooting at us?"

IT seemed incredible that any human being possessed such tremendous powers of concentration that he could live through an earthquake and not know it, but Stregel had done just that. He had been so engrossed in the task before him that he hadn't noticed the beams driving down through the roof.

"You're darned right they've been shooting at us!" Strong said grimly. He lifted the generator from the floor. "How does this thing work?"

"It hasn't been tested," Stregel protested. "It must be tested first."

"Tested, my eye! There's no time for that!"

"But Don, you do not understand. Maybe it doesn't work right. Maybe, instead of doing what I think, it blows us all to dust. There are big powers in that little box."

"If it blows up, it will have to blow up," Strong replied grimly.

Stregel was a scientist, a mathematician, a theorist. He had the type of mind that could fathom how the generators operated. He knew almost intuitively the mathematical electronics involved in transforming the protective screen of force into an engine of destruction. But he was a scientist; he had to try out his theories to see if they worked.

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There was no time to try out anything. There was only time for action.

"I'll carry the generator. You work it!" Don Strong directed.

The box was heavy. Strong lifted it, turned. Where the floor of the temple had been smooth was now a pile of stones that had fallen from the roof. Through the opening that the beams had made, the sky was visible overhead. Strong climbed to the top of the heap of stones. He looked back. Stregel was coming after him.

Up there in the sky was the airship.

Don Strong held the generator. Stregel operated the controls. Beads of sweat had formed on the scientist's face but his fingers did not falter.

Strong was holding his breath. At any second another beam would lash down from the ship. The crew had the range now, they could not well miss again. One more shot would probably bring the whole temple down.

Arrayed against the ship was—a box.

A dozen "ifs" flashed through Don Strong's mind. Was Stregel right? Would the fool thing work? Or would it work too well—and, as Stregel had hinted, blow the temple and all its occupants into bits finer than dust?

There was no way to know the answer to that question, in advance. You had to try and find out. You had to wait and see.

Strong heard Stregel grunt. At the same time he felt something flash through his body, a tingling sensation.

Out from the ball-tipped rod on top of the generator there sprang a beam of barely visible radiance. The faintest shade of purple, it went up through the sky like the ray from some small searchlight. It wavered, swung in an arc, missed the ship and plunged off into the sky at the speed of light.

Strong could see the crew of the ship looking down, lining up their projector. He heard Stregel grunt a second time.

The beam of purple radiance swung back in an arc as the scientist manipulated the controls. It touched the airship, went through it, winged into the sky beyond as if it had met no resistance.

Brrrung!

Cannon fire rolled in the sky. A battery of artillery; two, ten batteries of artillery, firing at the same split instant, would have provided an echo for this sound. The sky seemed to split wide open. The roar rumbled into the distance, rumbled back. Groaning, the heavens seemed to collapse.

With a clatter of thunder the heavens rolled together again.

DON STRONG looked up. Where the ship had been was a vast puff of boiling white smoke. It mushroomed outward, riding the blasting fury that was at its core.

The ship was gone. From the sky droplets of metal began to fall.

Stregel sighed. "It worked," he said simply.

Strong got down from the pile of fallen stone. He walked to the door of the temple. The city was locked in silence. On a nearby roof were Zombar and Trait. They were staring upward, toward the spot where the ship had been.

"Turn this thing on again," Strong said.

Stregel obeyed. Outward leaped the cone of purple radiance. It hit the building, went through it.

The roof of the building tried to climb into the sky. It went up, up, up, zooming outward from the fury that had passed through it. The walls fell out, dancing a mad jig as the stones that composed them, struck by the terrible disruptive force, tried to smash away from each other. A cannon ball of pure force had passed through the building.

Zombar and Trait went up with the roof. As bits of battered flesh, they came down with it.

Don Strong turned to the three old men who had been gods of Sundra Unuum.

"If you walk out now and tell them you are Roumi," he said, "I think they will believe you."

Ulysses went first. There was fire in his eyes and his step was firm. His two companions followed close behind him. They had never been gods, except in the superstitions of the

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people they had forgotten. But when they walked from the temple, they walked with the sureness of deities.

On every rooftop, Zombar's men could be seen throwing their weapons away, prostrating themselves before the three who came toward them.

The Roumi were returning to their people.

CHAPTER XX

Beyond Men's Eyes

THREE days later Don Strong stood before a round opening that was filled with pearl-gray mist. Barely visible in the opening was the top of a ladder.

An elderly man was leaning on his arm—his father. R. T. Strong, with the other prisoners, had been found in the city.

Zombar's men were glad to lead the Roumi to their prisoners.

"I'll go first and give your father a hand down," said Rikki.

"Okay," Don answered.

Rikki stepped into the round opening, balanced himself on the ladder, went out of sight.

Then his voice was heard from below.

"All right."

"Take it easy, Dad," Don cautioned.

"I will, son," the old man answered. Carefully he stepped on the top rung of the ladder, went slowly down and out of sight.

That left Don and Jean Sharp in the outer-dimensional room. It also left Stregel and the three Roumi and Quintus there.

"Good-by," said Ulysses. "And may the time soon come when your people are prepared to believe there is a world beyond the sky. Then we can undertake cultural relations and commerce between the two universes, to the benefit of both."

"Rikki and I have already planned what to do," Don Strong told him. He nodded toward the girl. "She's a writer. It will be her job to prepare a propaganda campaign to educate people so they won't be too shocked to learn of the existence of Sundra Unuum."

He looked at Jean. "It's a big job for a little girl," he said. "Do you think you can handle it?"

"Say, I'm not so little," she retorted, smiling. "And anyhow, you and Rikki are going to help me, aren't you?"

"Yep," said Rikki's voice from the round opening. "And if I might mention it, I'm getting tired of holding this ladder. So if you two will get on down here, I'll appreciate it."

Ulysses extended his hand. Don Strong took it. Then he helped Jean to the top rung of the ladder. She went down and he followed her.

"Good-by." Stregel yelled at them, from the round opening. "Good-by!"

"Good-by yourself, you big ape," Rikki answered. "And don't forget to pull up the ladder."

Grinning, Stregel pulled it up. It went out of sight in the round opening that hung in the air in what had been the temple of the devil-worshippers. Then little by little the aperture began to close.

The last sight they saw was Stregel's face grinning down at them as the opening into Sundra Unuum closed.

Rikki sighed. "The big ape! Because there was so much to learn over there, he would insist on staying. Old truth-lies-over-a-hill-Stregel. He got something he wanted out of this experience, anyhow. At long last he can look over one of the hills he has always to peep behind. And that's enough to make him happy for the rest of his mathematical life."

Slowly they walked out of the old warehouse. Once they had entered here, seeking devil-worshipers. They had found things that were not devils but were inhabitants of another universe. Now that they knew the truth, another task lay ahead—that of educating the people of Earth to the knowledge that there were other universes.

It would be no easy task. They would organize it like an advertising campaign. First there would be little squibs in newspapers. Publicity, designed to prepare people for the truth. Then would come articles, stories in

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magazines, books, a whole campaign.

Both Rikki and Stregel knew from bitter experience that the truth, flung in the face of an unprepared public, is often flung right back, labeled "Lies!"

It was their task to prepare the public for the news of the existence of Sundra Unuum; so that, eventually, both universes could benefit from the knowledge gained in each. It was their job, too, to explain to skeptical officials how Zombar had opened a second aperture in the Brooklyn warehouse, stolen R. T. Strong's government-hoarded copper.

They were outside the building now.

"Little Old New York, we're back," Rikki said.

It was night. People were on the streets. Cars were passing. An occasional soldier or sailor strolled by, a girl on his arm.

"Yes," said Don Strong. "This is New York." He cocked a thumb toward the building they were quitting. "And somewhere back over yonder is a land beyond the sky."

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SPEAK OF THE DEVIL

An Astounding Complete Novel by Norman A. Daniels

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4. CLEAN BLADE in razor by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

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FORGOTTEN PAST

By WILLIAM MORRISON

One Plus Sign for a Minus Throws the Future—and Doom—on the Screen of Leclerc's Uncanny Machine When He Seeks to Turn Time Backward in Its Flight!

I DIED," said Leclerc. "That's the point. To all intents and purposes I died and came to life again as a new person. That's why I'm curious."

Galway stared around the laboratory. Parts of Leclerc's apparatus were scattered over three work-tables, and to Galway the whole set-up was completely baffling. Recording dials, vacuum tubes, electrodes, gadgets whose names he didn't know, were everywhere.

It looked ten times as complicated as the average radio hook-up. He was so completely bewildered by the array of different instruments that he suspected that even Leclerc himself wouldn't be able to make the apparatus work.

"You're alive again," Galway pointed out.

"I know. But for that to happen, my second personality had to be destroyed. Let me describe what happened this way. Four years ago I suffered a spell of amnesia. It lasted for eighteen months. That's what I mean by saying I died. My body remained, but the mind I had possessed

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until then disappeared just as completely as if a bomb had shattered me to bits."

GALWAY nodded. He understood how Leclerc felt. Sometimes he himself had an odd feeling that he died whenever he lay down to sleep, and came alive again when he got up the next morning. Some primitive people, he knew, actually seemed to think that was what happened when a man went to sleep.

"When I came to myself again—that is, when my *second* personality died, and my first one returned to life—I was wearing an expensive suit of clothes, had a money belt containing five thousand dollars around my waist, and was spending the night in a flophouse. I don't know how I came to be there."

"You could have hired detectives to investigate," Galway suggested.

"I did, but I got nowhere. I had no papers on me, and I never found out what name I had used during those eighteen months. I've always wanted to know. I simply burn up with curiosity every time I think about it."

"What does it matter?"

"A great deal. Did I marry, acquire a wife and child? Are there friends who are looking for me? I don't know. But I want to know. Eighteen months of my life gone, and I can't say where they've gone to. Do you recall, Galway, how you feel when you're trying to remember a name, and it seems just on the tip of your tongue, but you can't quite think of it? You can't solve your problem, and you can't put it out of your mind."

Galway nodded. "I know. Sometimes it's the devil and all."

"It's been that way with me. And it's been going on for more than two years. I've sometimes thought I'd go crazy trying to remember. What *is* that past I've forgotten? Where was I during those eighteen months? It's to answer these questions that I've invented this machine."

Galway shook his head. He didn't see exactly how the machine was going to help.

"What does it do?" he asked. "Travel in time?"

"No, not that. Most of this talk of time-travel is rot. Notice that I don't say all of it, but most of it. You can't travel into the past. The past is an infinite region in the four-dimensional space-time continuum whose nature has been completely determined. All the world-lines, as Minkowski put it, the world-surfaces, the world-volumes are completely known. Traveling in the past would change them. It can't be done."

"I don't understand," Galway murmured, "but I'll take your word for it."

"You don't have to. Here." Leclerc gathered together a handful of papers, with equations marching in order on page after page. "Here are my calculations. The conclusions I've just given to you aren't obvious, and they didn't just come out of the air. I slaved for months to get them."

"All right. What then?"

"Travel into the future is another matter. The future is to a certain extent uncertain. Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle holds on the atomic level, and that's enough to assure indeterminism on a macroscopic scale. To put it mathematically—the past is single-valued, the future many-valued. The present is a branch point. Travel into the future changes the future. It would be difficult to do, but it's theoretically possible."

"Yes, but that," pointed out Galway, "is not your problem."

"Right. My problem is the past. Here an alternate sort of time-travel is possible with a history-scanning machine, such as the one I have constructed. Here the situation is reversed. I can, after a fashion, travel into the past—without affecting it, simply as an observer. I can show you Washington at Valley Forge, Lincoln at Gettysburg, and Wilson at Versailles.

"These things of the past are fixed regions in space-time. But I can't show you future events. I can't show you Roosevelt in Berlin, because whether or not he gets to Berlin is not yet decided. It depends on too many atomic processes."

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"But your apparatus *will* show you the past?"

"It will, if you'll give me a hand for a while."

Galway nodded, and they set to work. Galway himself was no great hand in a laboratory, but he could appreciate skill when he saw it, and he marveled at the intelligence that Leclerc's fingers seemed to display. He himself was of some use as an assistant, and with Leclerc directing, the work progressed rapidly.

A fourth table held the only part of the apparatus that Galway could understand. This was a television receiving set, connected to work-table Number Three. But the ordinary tuning devices had been removed, and instruments of Leclerc's own substituted.

Leclerc tightened a final screw, and paused.

"Ready to go?" Galway asked.

"In a way. My space-control scanner isn't in good shape. It probably won't get a view more than a few miles away from here. I'll have to try extending the range later. But provided that I stayed within the city during those eighteen months, it'll do for now."

"How about the time control?"

"I expect some trouble with that. I've done some preliminary experiments, and discovered that one turn of the control wheel seems to put me back a few months, and the next turn five years. But I'll try to straighten that out later."

Leclerc had begun to adjust the different control switches. A suppressed excitement showed in his manner. Two of the vacuum tubes glowed. One remained cold.

"Something wrong?" asked Galway.

"No," Leclerc assured. "That's all right."

Galway was aware of a growing feeling of tension. Somehow he had come to share Leclerc's faith in the machine. It was going to recreate the past for them—and finally, after all his tortured searching, Leclerc was going to learn what had happened to him during those eighteen months.

Leclerc moved over to the television set. A picture suddenly flashed on the screen, an image of Galway and Leclerc themselves, but in slightly different positions from the ones they now occupied.

"That's us a few minutes ago." Leclerc turned a dial slowly. And swore.

The picture had turned into a dull blur. Leclerc kept fiddling with the controls, but the blur remained. Suddenly a picture of himself alone flashed on the screen.

"It isn't as clear as I hoped," he said anxiously.

"Is that you four years ago, or ten, or twelve?"

"I don't know, but I'll find out."

The image of Leclerc moved to the right. The real Leclerc dashed to the space control to keep himself in view. The image put on a hat and coat, then walked out of the room. A second later, they saw it in the street.

LECLERC had difficulty in controlling his excitement. The image made for a subway station, hesitated, then moved on.

"By glory, I think I've hit it!" Leclerc exclaimed.

"You mean that this is the time you started on your travels in amnesia?"

"It seems incredible, but I think it is. What luck! I've gone down into that subway station every day for years. But as for the times I've passed it up and kept on going down the street—I don't remember any except that one occasion four years ago. That is the last thing I do remember until I awoke in that flophouse. From that moment my mind was a blank."

The figure turned right, and Leclerc cursed as he lost it. But a second later the space control had brought it into view again. From then on they kept it in sight.

The image of Leclerc was walking irresolutely. Finally it stopped, and raised a hand as if in pain to its head. For a few seconds it didn't move.

"I guess that's how it happened," breathed Leclerc. "No blow, no shock. Just a sudden blanking out of the mental processes."

The figure turned around, and made for the subway station it had passed. It put a nickel in a turnstile, and entered a train.

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They could see the image of Leclerc himself fairly well, but it was impossible to make out clearly any of the other passengers. Their faces were hazy, out of focus.

For half an hour, the train moved on. It was a local, and even though the experience was no longer happening to him, Leclerc couldn't help expressing his irritation.

"Those blasted locals that stop every five or ten blocks are a nuisance. I *must* have lost my mind to take it."

Finally, Leclerc's image got out. It walked up a flight of stairs, then through a crowded station, and into a long tunnel. Here it took another train, and at the next stop got out again.

"Shuttle to Times Square," muttered Galway unconsciously. He was staring in complete absorption.

The image, once it reached Times Square, seemed at a loss again. It walked around uncertainly, and finally entered a movie theatre. For just a second Leclerc switched the space control to the theatre screen, and then he turned quickly back to his own image.

"One of those horror things. I hate them. What a personality change I must have undergone!"

"Why not," asked Galway, "turn the time control two hours ahead? There's no sense in inflicting that epic on us. Especially, as we don't even see it."

Leclerc shook his head. "I told you the time control is erratic. I'm not taking any chances of losing myself."

IT WAS two and a half hours before the image arose to leave the theatre. It seemed as bewildered as before. They watched it start to cross a busy street with the traffic against it, and then draw back.

The traffic light changed. But the figure remained motionless. Then, just as the green light died away, it moved forward again. A heavy truck bore down, and they saw the figure look up in alarm.

A second later, Leclerc, searching frantically, found the spot where the truck had thrown his body. His image was lying motionless.

"There's that shock you said you didn't get."

"You mean that this is the incident that was responsible for my amnesia?"

"Isn't it?"

Leclerc enlarged the image. Men were already crowding around, but he got the face into view without difficulty. The head was bloody, the skull—

"Leclerc!" Galway exclaimed suddenly.

"What is it?"

"Your skull is crushed! I mean, in the picture!"

"They must have taken me to the hospital."

"Hospital, like sin! Take a look at yourself! Do you think you lived after that? They took you to the morgue! You were dead!"

"Are you crazy?"

Leclerc's eyes were popping out of his head.

"I think I am," Galway muttered.

The two men stared at each other. Then Leclerc turned back to the scanner. He traced his image a little further, enough to assure himself that Galway was right. He saw himself examined by a doctor, carted off to the morgue, and left on a cold slab. In a few days, if he had the patience to wait, he would see himself buried. He didn't bother.

Galway's face was pale.

"You really died," he said. "It's odd that you should have told me that at the beginning."

"Yes, but I didn't mean it in a physical sense. My personality died. But a new one took its place, and my body remained." He gazed into a mirror, and put a hand to his head. "You don't think I'm a ghost, do you?"

"No, I don't. You're just as much alive as I am. And yet, you died. How do you explain it?"

Leclerc was not ready with an answer.

"I don't explain it," he replied slowly. "Something's wrong, but I don't know what. I'll have to try again."

He began to manipulate the time scanner once more. It was not difficult to catch an image of himself leaving the house. But most of the

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time he caught the wrong image—of himself entering the subway directly. It was at least two hours before he found the one he wanted.

Galway stayed with him until he saw the image buy a ticket for the theatre again. Then he picked up his hat.

"I'll be blest if I sit through that show once more without seeing it," he said. "Good night."

Leclerc didn't even answer him. His eyes were shining a little too brightly, and he seemed not to hear. He was interested, as Galway put it to himself, in a certain little matter of life and death.

It was about a week before Galway saw the man again. In that time, Leclerc had lost about ten pounds, and his face had become old and haggard.

"Did you solve the difficulty?" Galway asked.

"No, I did not. The next time I kept an eye on what happened until the very end."

"Until you were buried?"

"Yes. It took several days, and I watched without leaving to eat or sleep. I had a crazy idea that maybe I wasn't really dead, that perhaps some doctor performed a miracle, and patched me up again. It didn't happen, of course. They put me under the ground, and I even saw myself beginning to rot. That was more than enough for me."

Galway shuddered. "It would have been enough for me too. And you haven't any idea of an explanation?"

"No, I haven't. No idea whatever. Great heavens above, I thought the state I was in before was bad enough. But now that I know what happened to me—this is worse."

He was right, thought Galway. He himself had spent an unpleasant week wondering at the explanation of Leclerc's death. He could imagine what Leclerc had gone through.

He spoke to Leclerc on the phone a month afterward. Still no solution. This time Leclerc seemed not too far from insanity. And then Galway, feeling that he was of no help, and affected by a kind of dread superstition that he tried in vain to shake off, as if Leclerc were really a ghost, lost sight of him.

IT WAS a year before he heard of Leclerc again. There was a small one-column headline in one of the papers, and Galway stared at it at first without realizing what he was reading:

MAN KILLED BY TRUCK IDENTIFIED

The man who stepped out of a motion picture theatre in an apparent daze, and was then killed while crossing the street has been identified as Joseph Leclerc.

Galway threw the paper down, and a shiver went through him. The explanation had been simple enough to any one not blinded, as Leclerc had been, by the prejudice of preconceived theories. Leclerc had observed the future instead of the past.

His device was not a history-scanning machine at all. It was a device for looking ahead in time, not back. Why had he made the mistake he had? Galway had a fair idea. Somewhere, on those pages of calculations, Leclerc *had* made a mistake. From one equation to the next he had substituted a plus sign where a minus should have been, or vice versa. And he had carried that mistake through to the very end.

As simple and trifling a mistake as plus for minus, and his ideas of past and future had been twisted completely about. He had said that no one could foresee the future, because the future was indeterminate.

It had not been indeterminate for him. Every time he had looked into it, he had seen the same thing. On the fatal day, he had left his laboratory with his mind in confusion, and had traced the same journey to death that he had watched his image make.

The forgotten period in Leclerc's past, which he had thought to see again, would now remain forgotten forever.

Galway threw the paper he had been holding onto a table, and then had to sit down because his knees were trembling. He was aware suddenly of a great temptation.

He could look into his own future.

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He could do just as Leclerc had done, trace his own history to the end, discover what kind of life he would lead, how he would die.

If he looked, the sight would drive him crazy, just as it would have driven Leclerc crazy if he had lived a little longer. He was sure of that. All the same, the temptation was strong, almost irresistible.

When his knees felt stronger, he stood up slowly, and made his way to Leclerc's laboratory. There he smashed the apparatus that was now scattered over five tables instead of four.

He ground pieces of glass under his heel with a fury that was inspired by both anger and fear.

It was only the television set that he thriftily left undamaged for the sake of Leclerc's unknown heirs.

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The Green Torture

By A. ROWLEY HILLIARD

The Physical Pain Thorne Went Through Was as Nothing Compared to the Mental Anguish of His Tormentor!

IN a room of bare concrete two men stood face to face. The black-bearded man spoke.

"Forget that our countries are at war—forget that you and I are enemies, and let me beg of you to tell them what they want to know; for I would not willingly condemn any human being to the torture you are about to undergo!"

The other, whose face was white and whose jaw was set, smiled grimly.

"Sir, you are a hypocrite. I happen to know that the device is of your own invention."

"True, I conceived it myself—true, it was built under my supervision; but I acted under orders. They told me to devise a method of extracting information from captured prisoners, and I have done it. The Council has sent you to me, and I will not hesitate to obey its orders. I love my country, sir—as much as you do yours."

"The noble Council that must torture a helpless man!" mocked the other.

The black-bearded man flushed, but remained calm.

"A little after the beginning of this century," he said seriously, "the nations of the earth joined against each other in a struggle which we still know by the name of the World War. It was a struggle of brute force. Tens of thousands of men clashed together, hacking each other with knives called bayonets, or disemboweling each other at short range with gunpowder projectiles.

"True, they made rudimentary attempts to smother each other with gases—true, they engaged in petty squabbles above the ground in their suicidal flying planes; but these were merely side-shows. The basic principle of the affair was the man-to-man combat. At that time, therefore—"

"You can spare me your history lessons, I hope!" interrupted the other impatiently.

The man raised his hand. "I have good reasons for saying what I do," he insisted. "At that time, therefore, the importance of any particular man—even of one in command of his fellows—was not great; and his capture was an event of no particular significance. He might have some minor information on strategy, but the method of attack was so cut and dried as to be never in doubt.

"If a captured man were a spy, his captors usually were contented to threaten him with death; and, if he told them nothing, they would stand him against a wall and shoot him.

"In 1980, however, it is different. In these days of scientific warfare the importance of the individual has been greatly enhanced. The destructive knowledge that one man can hold in his brain is enormous—awful!

"The Council has reason to believe that you know the particulars of an attack which is to be launched against us. Every destructive agency has its antidote—every attack its defense. And that is why you must tell us what you know."

"That is why I will *not* tell you what I know."

"That we shall see, Dr. Thorne!"

EDITOR'S NOTE

Some stories are forgotten almost as soon as they are printed. Others stand the test of time.

Because "The Green Torture," by A. Rowley Hilliard, has stood this test, it has been nominated for SCIENTIFICTION'S HALL OF FAME and is reprinted here.

In each issue we honor one of the outstanding fantasy classics of all time, as selected by our readers.

We hope in this way to bring a new permanence to the science fiction gems of yesterday and to perform a real service to the science fiction devotees of today and tomorrow.

We invite you to nominate your own favorites! Send a letter or postcard to The Editor, STARTLING STORIES, 10 East 40th St., New York, N. Y. All suggestions are more than welcome!

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Bjornsen pointed at the metallic belt

THORNE remained silent. For the last two days since his capture he had heard nothing but threats; and now they irritated rather than frightened him. For hours at a time, he had been heckled and browbeaten by the most vigorous members of the Council, but not one scrap of information had he divulged. As a last resort they had sent him to Bjornsen, the great scientist and inventor, whom two short years ago—before the outbreak of the war—he would have been proud to call his friend.

A hot anger gripped him. Friend! Never could he forgive Bjornsen for this humiliation of a fellow scientist. After trying his other methods of browbeating him, they had put him in this place of bare concrete. And now Bjornsen had come with more threats!

Hate gleamed in his eyes. "Bjornsen, I will never tell you what our attack will be. You will never know until it comes and you are as helpless as a child in our hands—you, your wise Council, and your whole nation!

"You began this war, but we shall end it," he continued tauntingly. "And you are helpless. We shall not use anything so old-fashioned as poison gas, so childish as projected disease bacilli, or so unsatisfactory as destructive atomic force. No! Our plans are made, the day is set, and—"

"Enough!" Bjornsen's face was working with fear and fury. He pressed a button in the wall by his side.

"I think you are a little too sure of yourself, Dr. Thorne. I have warned you; I tried to be decent to you; now all of that is at an end."

Heavy muffled footsteps sounded in the corridor. Two muscular Negroes appeared, pushing gingerly between them a strange machine. It was squat and heavy looking, like an upright egg, small end uppermost, and resting upon three broad, rubber-shod wheels. The top was surmounted by small sharp spikes. Other spikes stuck out maliciously from the body and all of them were colored a dark green, shiny, radiant, malignant.

Thorne was silent, staring at the contrivance in utter amazement.

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At a guttural word from Bjornsen they released it in the middle of the floor, across which it started slowly moving. One of the Negroes handed him what appeared to be a belt, made of finely meshed metal threads. This he cast clanking into a corner.

And then Thorne felt a cold sensation in his stomach. He gazed wide-eyed. The crawling thing was turning slowly—turning in the direction of the belt!

The black-bearded man regarded it lovingly.

"You are surprised, I think," he said with a mocking smile. His fury had abated, and he spoke maliciously—cruelly.

"I will explain to you my pretty crawling thing. It is powered by a battery which will propel it for fifty hours. You see that it is moving toward the metal in the corner. That is mysterious—eh?"

Thorne said nothing. From the belt of the other hung a small ray pistol. A sudden leap might get it . . .

"That is mysterious only to you," Bjornsen continued. "The metal yonder is highly magnetized. Within my toy is a magnetic needle which controls its movements. Thus it has—ah—it has—an affinity! That is good—eh?" He chuckled. "And it is so shaped that it will not lie upon its back like a turtle. Ah, no! That would make it helpless—eh?

"Also I should warn you very earnestly—for it concerns you—that the prongs are needle-sharp, and are coated—pay attention!—are coated with a peculiar poisonous vegetable substance from the region of the Amazon River. There the natives use it on the missiles which they hurl. The slightest prick . . ." He laughed—but did not complete his sentence.

Thorne was scarcely listening to this harangue, although he vaguely realized its deadly import. He was tensing himself for a spring.

"I had thought of an alternative," the man continued conversationally. "I had thought of attaching a compartment filled with one of my poison gases, which would be released when my toy met with any resistance. But I prefer the prongs. The gas seemed too—too—what shall I say?—too anesthetic! You see, I—"

AT this point Thorne leaped. The man jumped back.

"Seize him!" he shouted. Like two great cats, the Negroes were upon him; and his struggles were useless.

"Hold him!" ordered Bjornsen. He walked over, and picked up the belt toward which the strange thing was relentlessly moving. This he pulled around the waist of the struggling Thorne. He snapped a padlock, and stood back rubbing his hands.

"You and my toy," he said calmly, "shall play a game of hide and seek together—in the dark! To aid you, you will notice that I have placed a small green light at each end of my toy. I hope that you will watch it carefully. I have found that it requires about twenty seconds to cross this floor. Oh yes! It has been used. The last man that played the game told us what we wanted after twenty hours. A sad case, though; he is now completely insane!"

Shaking his head sadly, he spoke to the Negroes. They released Thorne, and went into the passageway. Thorne stood still; he could think of nothing to say or do. The black-bearded man bowed ceremoniously.

"I hope that you will not be cold," he said. "I am sorry that I cannot let you have more clothes. However, you will find yourself becoming warm naturally. When you want me you have only to press this button in the wall. You should shift your position soon. Good-by!"

He slipped into the passageway and slammed the heavy door.

Thorne felt a sensation of relief that he was alone. He looked around him curiously. The room was square, about fifteen feet across, and absolutely bare. The walls and floor were of concrete. In the ceiling gleamed a white dome of light.

Slowly he became conscious of a soft whirring sound behind him. He looked down. Less than three inches from his leg—pointed the green prongs! The light suddenly went out; absolute blackness enveloped him. He stumbled blindly forward, and crashed against the wall. He faced around, panting and shaking.

And then, as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he saw the green light. It was small and dim; it cast no gleam. Eying it intently, the man felt his way along the wall to the farthest corner of the room.

He sat on the floor; for he knew that he must conserve his strength, and the iron belt was very heavy. He was not frightened now. The ease with which he had evaded the thing gave him confidence. Twenty seconds to get to him, it would take. . .

He set about reviewing in his mind the conversation with Bjornsen. He shouldn't have lost his temper; that had been a mistake. Still, he hadn't told them anything useful. They could never guess—never! His mind traveled back to the time of his great discovery—over a year ago, now.

He remembered how he had been experimenting in his laboratory with new high-frequency radio waves for the control of air torpedoes; how by coordinating a series of oscillators he had achieved high frequencies never before dreamed of—a million kilocycles and more; how his whole body had been gripped as by an awful power; how the world had gone black before his eyes, and he had known no more.

Vividly he recalled his recovery two days later in the hospital and his consultation with the puzzled doctor, who said he had suffered complete paralysis of the nerves, but could suggest no cause.

With typical scientific curiosity Thorne had set to work to solve the mystery. The fact that his laboratory assistant had suffered in exactly the same way was the clue

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that finally led to his astounding discovery —that radio waves passing through the body within a certain range of very high frequencies attack the nerves, producing a temporary complete paralysis!

And yet it was not unbelievable, as he had pointed out many times since then. Electromagnetic waves affect the optic nerves only within a very narrow range of frequencies. There are many other colors than those that we see such as red, violet, blue, green . . .

Green!

As he thought, his eyes had been fastened upon the green light. It was the only use for them. The darkness was so complete that he could see no part of his own body.

He grew puzzled, then uneasy. It should be moving, he knew; yet it appeared to be perfectly stationary. The whirring sound had never ceased.

SUDDENLY, nervously, he leaped to his feet. The realization of what this meant had come to him. He could not see it move! The only tool of perspective left to him—that of change in size—was gone. He felt his way hurriedly along the wall, turned a corner, and moved on until he could see no green light at all. He knew that he must be opposite the side of the machine. He stood absolutely still, straining his eyes.

A speck appeared, moved. He could tell that it was moving slowly sideward. Then it became stationary. And he knew that the thing had turned, and was once more coming steadily toward him. He remained motionless as long as he could, but the thought of being in that direct line was unnerving. Again he stumbled along the wall. He sank to the floor in a corner, only to struggle to his feet again and move uneasily on.

He was losing his sense of the passage of time. Twenty seconds to cross the floor, Bjornsen had said. Two minutes—twenty minutes—an hour—it was all the same!

The room was a room no longer. It was an endless wall which scraped his skin as he fled—which bumped and jarred him at its corners.

Hunted by a relentless green death in a timeless and spaceless darkness! The man trembled. The palms of his hands were clammy. He moved in spasmodic jerks, breathing unevenly.

The man became tired. The realization that he was wasting precious energy slowly calmed him.

"I must keep my head!" he muttered. "I must!"

For the first time his thoughts turned on the machine itself. Surely a senseless thing could not hunt a man to his death! It was inconceivable. He struggled for a minute to remove the belt, but realized the futility of that. No, he must attack the thing itself.

He followed the wall until no green light was visible. Breathing heavily, he crept out across the floor. He tried to guide himself by the whirring sound, but it seemed to come from everywhere. Suddenly a green light appeared. Clenching his fists and setting his teeth, the man walked deliberately toward it as far as he dared.

Then he circled quickly, and knew that he must be almost at the side of the thing. He thought that the whirring was louder. He leaned over, and reached down.

With a cry he leaped back. In the nick of time he had remembered the deadly green spikes on top. He must approach it from below. Calming himself, he got to his knees. He reached his hand along the floor —farther—farther . . .

He touched something hard and smooth. It was vibrating softly. Feeling his way carefully, he maneuvered until he had a hand on each side, his fingers beneath it. He was going to lift it as high as he could, and dash it to the floor. He got to his feet and pulled upward with all his strength. The thing was unbelievably heavy. He raised it a few inches; then his fingers gave away, and he fell backward. There was a loud bump, but the soft whirring never ceased.

Nerving himself, he returned to the attack. He would turn it on its back. Perhaps Bjornsen had lied to him. By a series of careful maneuvers he got both hands under one side, and heaved. He leaped back against the wall, trembling. The thing had righted itself so quickly that the cold metal had grazed his ankle. He remembered a toy he had once, like this. It would rest in no position except on its base.

He would try once more. He stood with his back against the wall, his legs wide apart, and waited. He could not tell how long he waited, but suddenly the thing was very near. The light was almost beneath him. Now he could see its slow advance. He tensed himself. He was terribly afraid, but he did not move. And then, as it seemed about to press itself upon him, he jumped sideward. And then what he had hoped for happened.

The whirring ceased, the light stopped in its advance, and he knew that the deadly prongs were against the wall.

HE knew that there were prongs at the other end, he knew that the devilish thing could reverse itself, but he blindly hoped that because it was stopped it would not start again. He crossed the floor. He held his breath. To his ears came the soft, steady purr. He sank to the floor, sobbing.

He knew that he could not leave the wall again. Never again could he approach that awful machine voluntarily. He must flee—flee continually—how long? Fifty hours, his tormentor had said. That meant nothing. What was an hour? How. . .

Light—dazzling, blinding! He clapped his hands to his eyes. It was some minutes before he could see—see the thing approaching from the center of the floor—

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squat, implacable. Quickly he looked away. On the floor by the door lay food, and water in a paper cup. He knew that he was being watched.

High in the door was a porthole of heavy glass. Faintly he heard a laugh. A mad anger gripped him. He ran at the machine, and beat its hard sides with his fists. The light went out. His terror returning with the darkness, he retreated, hit heavily against the wall, and fell.

He tried to close his eyes to shut out the green light, but he could not. He must watch it; it held him. He felt that he could not move. He heard his heartbeats blended with the soft purr behind that dull, green, menacing eye. It was coming—coming . . .

With a shuddering sigh he staggered to his feet. He couldn't stand it—he didn't care what happened. He felt along the wall —There! He had it. His finger was on the button.

Then realization came, and he paused. He, Dr. Thorne, who had already been hailed as the savior of his country, was now its betrayer. He, who had supervised the construction of the great broadcasting machine which was to make helpless the enemies of his country, was now about to make it useless. His hand dropped from the button and clenched by his side. Rather than do that he would cast himself upon those deadly prongs.

And yet, even as the thought came to his mind, he knew that he could never approach the thing. His eyes fixed upon the green light and, a horrible fear in his heart, he backed slowly away.

The man lay huddled in a corner, staring —fascinated by the point of green. It would get him now. Time after time he had forced his failing body into action. There had been periods of calm, when he had paced slowly along the endless wall until his feet were abraded and sore; there had been periods of madness when he had lurched to right and left, bumping and bruising himself. But he had grown weak. He had eaten the food, and no more had come.

For an interminable time he had fought off drowsiness. In spite of all his efforts his eyes would close. He had counted sixty times sixty, and had dozed—warned by a sixth sense he had awakened to a green light very near, had leaped up in terror, had rushed headlong against the unyielding wall, had sunk down helpless. It would get him now.

The green light grew and grew. It became immense—all encompassing. The steady whir grew louder and louder. With a piercing pain in his side, he was sinking —falling headlong into a great, green, roaring void—down—swiftly down . . .

Sunlight on a white coverlet, bending figures, and:

"Feeling better, Doctor?"

Thorne turned his head upon the pillow. He recognized the voice of Rand, his assistant, and strove to speak.

"Please lie quietly. You are in a hospital, and you are all right."

Thorne stirred uneasily. His body was very sore—especially one side. He wet his lips with his tongue.

"Please don't try to talk. I will tell you everything that happened. Because of your capture the attack was made ahead of schedule, and it was a glorious success. When they recovered, they begged for peace at any terms. The war is over!"

THORNE smiled weakly. He was very happy. There were other things he wanted to know, however. He opened his mouth, but the other continued.

"Well, an air squadron was sent over right away because the first thing everybody wanted to do was to find you, if you were still alive; and I went along with them, of course. When we got there they took us to a big house, and in the cellar we found you. You were all rolled up in a corner, and right beside you was the strangest machine I have ever seen.

"Three prongs on the front of it had pierced your side. A sort of metal belt around your waist was all that kept it from killing you. But with that and the radio paralysis on top of it, we thought you were surely gone, and I congratulate—"

Thorne's eyes were wide with wonder.

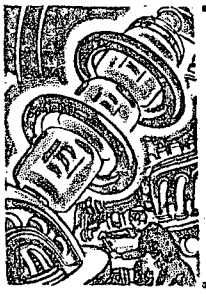
"But the prongs—the poison?" he whispered.

"Poison? Nobody saw any poison. The prongs were painted green, but why anybody should want to paint them we couldn't imagine. Maybe—"

Thorne closed his eyes, and sighed. Then he laughed brokenly, triumphantly.

"Of course he didn't want to kill me," he muttered. "The devil, the clever devil!"

And nobody knew what he meant.



NEXT ISSUE'S HALL OF FAME CLASSIC

THE SUPER VELOCITOR

By S. C. CARPENTER

An Astonishing Tale of Invisible Men!

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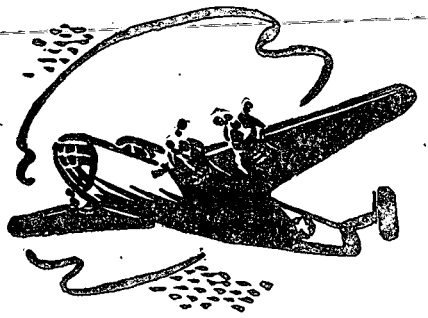
AMERICA'S SUPREME TASK

A Message to the Home Front



By

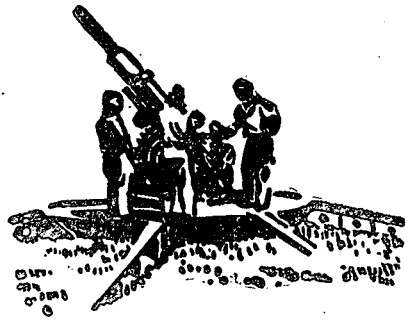
LT. GEN. BREHON SOMERVELL

THIS WAR is going to be won by fighting men—by men on blazing deserts, on northern wastes; by men fighting in the air and on scattered seas. Wherever the enemy is, our fighting men will attack and attack until victory is won.

The supreme task of all behind the battle lines is to provide the guns, the tanks, the planes, the ships, the equipment to make our fighting men strong and irresistible. They can fight and win, if we are certain that no second is lost in producing and sending them the weapons and the supplies so urgently needed now and until the final shot is fired that destroys the Axis.

A long, hard struggle faces us. Some few still talk despairingly of the need for greater sacrifices, of the little things that we must forego, of changes in the everyday habits of life of the civilian population.

Those at home, in factories, in fields, in the thousands of jobs the national effort requires, are demonstrating every day through selfless service their willingness and determination to concentrate all energies on winning the war.



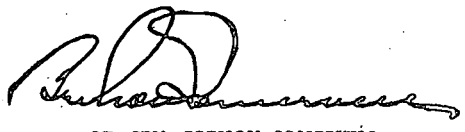
The spirit of America is one of our greatest assets. It stems from an abiding faith in our way of life which we shall preserve and expand. This spirit is an asset which the whip-driven Axis powers do not possess, and never can. Only free men and women can own such a precious treasure.

You on the home front and we in the Army are a team. Our goal is victory. Let us not delude ourselves. We haven't had too much success so far. Let us not indulge in the luxury of wishful thinking. Our foe is strong and resourceful. This is no Saturday afternoon football game. It is a grim and deadly business.

Sweat, fortitude, unfailing devotion to daily tasks, no matter how trivial they may seem—these are the ingredients of victory.

Our fighting men are on the march in far-flung regions of the world, striking with unexampled courage at the enemy. They won't fail you.

Give 'em firepower!



LT. GEN. BREHON SOMERVELL,
Services of Supply, Commanding.

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The Man Who Was King

By
NATHANIEL NITKIN

Former Pals of an Ex-Space Pirate Face Annihilation When Red Carson Goes Into Action to Save a Plague-Stricken Martian City!

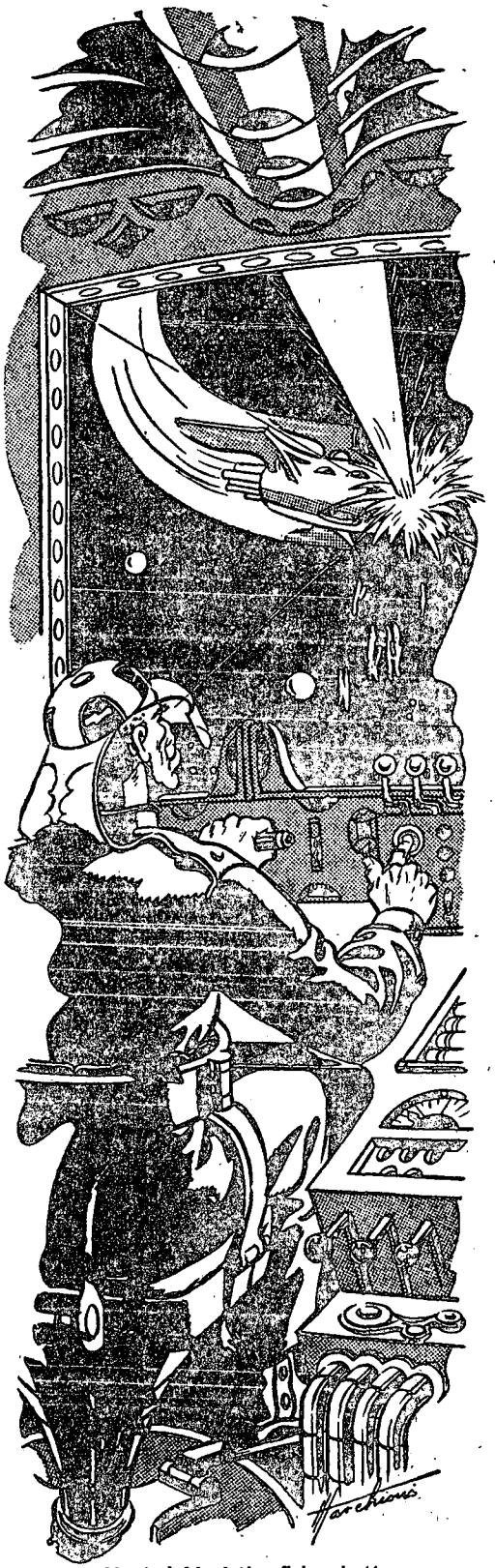
FOR two weeks, its people hopelessly scanning the amplifying screen of the Observatory for armed cruisers from Terra, and hearses daily dragging corpses of Nitrobacter Plague victims to gutted graves. Mars City, a small outpost in the Syrtis Major area of Mars, had been blockaded.

The colony had no right to expect help from war-torn Terra, where millions of lives were at stake.

Perhaps help would come too late; the plague was raging unchecked. The only serum and antitoxin that could conquer the plague were cached in Phobos, where, on the satellite's airless and frigid surface, they were kept from deteriorating.

All the time, Konrad's pirate fleet, which had been organized by the late Hugh "Red" Carson, were cruising to and fro on a death watch. It was Konrad's cheap way of winning the colony's treasures, a peculiar carbon isotope that could be rendered radioactive for a long time.

In Mars City, a half-hearted semblance of daily life went on. Men continued to operate the automatic loaders that stacked Martian carbon into loading bins — pathetically useless jobs. The freighters, already choked with this carbon, could not run to Terra because of Konrad's blockade.



Hugh jabbed the firing button

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Carbon could not save Nitrobacter Plague victims' lives.

One of the men operating the loader was Hugh. Who he was, and where he came from, nobody in Mars City knew.

When he appeared, he was a man broken in spirit. His story was that his transport had been attacked by Konrad, and they were the only survivors.

There was nothing remarkable about Hugh. A short man, barely five feet, six inches, thick-set without superfluous flesh, hard as vulcanite plastic. He had a broken nose and a poorly healed scar that ran vividly across his forehead, wounds sustained in the space fight against Konrad. But his eyes. They were a sparkling blue like tropical Terra sky and had that mysterious vividness that belonged only to exceptional men. With all this went a mop of brilliant red hair.

But Hugh was only an ordinary man, apparently without a single talent to set him above the crowd. He had an exceptionally beautiful wife, Rosalie. The crew of the freighter that had picked him in Titan, had been openly contemptuous of him, though respectful to his wife.

A third-shift worker came to him. Without word, Hugh turned the controls of the automatic loader over to him. Away he walked with the singular rolling gait of a spacehound, toward the city's walkways.

Hugh took no notice of the creaking hearses and of the horror-stricken faces of those who had lost their kin. He had seen death in its worst forms so often that Nitrobacter Plague alone made no impression on him.

His wife was waiting for him in their little apartment when he arrived. They embraced and as Hugh looked at her again, his face showed his anxiety for her.

Slightly taller than he, Rosalie was still a very beautiful woman, although unmistakable lines of suffering had crept into her face. She was slim and had the smooth, well-proportioned figure that set her apart from the women of Mars City. Her lovely dark hair showed here and there a strand of gray. Her eyes were troubled.

"Colonel Hanlon made another speech," Hugh said, his tone betraying contempt for the military governor of Mars City.

Rosalie looked at him with interest.

"What did he say?" she asked.

"He said he's organizing an attack that's sure to break the blockade. He's lying. Three fighters, that's all he has. His transports are vulnerable. He can't beat Konrad by sticking his tongue out at him. If he means it, he'll have to be a darn good strategist." Then he added, as he sat down, "which he isn't."

"But he's trying to keep up the city's morale," Rosalie said.

Hugh shrugged. "Morale will improve by more modesty on Hanlon's part. By the way, he showed us the disposition of Konrad's fleet by amplifying screen."

"Well?"

"Konrad's ship is well behind the blockading fighters," Hugh remarked. "He lets his men take the brunt of any attack. He's made sure that *his* precious fat skin isn't touched."

"You know so much about Konrad," said Rosalie slowly and a bit bitterly. "You are the only one who can take advantage of his weakness."

"What do you mean?"

"Why don't you, Hugh Red Carson, break Konrad's blackade?"

Rosalie looked at Hugh, alias Hugh Red Carson, who hung his head without replying. Since he had been deposed as pirate leader, his spirit had been broken.

It had been different when Hugh was the swashbuckling leader of the wild pirates, whom he kept in check by stern discipline. She had been Rosalie Saulnier, a young chemist attached to the space freighter, *Orion*.

Hopelessly trapped by Hugh's clever tactics, the *Orion's* skipper was forced to surrender without having fired a shot in defense. After boarding the *Orion*, Hugh saw her and took her with him. She hated him, hated all his men, Konrad especially.

Konrad, trusted lieutenant of Red Carson, was Falstaffian in appearance. Outwardly he was a fat buffoon, with resplendent clothes, who loved drink

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and debauchery. But Rosalie's feminine intuition warned her against Konrad, and later she saw the reason. Behind the mass of fat lay a sly and calculating mind.

Though she knew that Red Carson was in love with her, she hated him at first. Then she realized that he was not an ordinary pirate. His stern discipline kept the pirates from massacring captives. Later, when Konrad took over the fleet, discipline broke and the pirates resorted to blood baths for their prisoners.

CURIOUS about Red Carson, she found out more about him. Carson had been the youngest skipper of the Black Ball space transports. Long suspected by the Space Patrol, his employer, a space baron, had made him a scapegoat for his greed by having contraband shifted to Carson's ship while he was treating the young skipper at dinner. After his arrest, Carson staged a clever and daring escape to the pirate stronghold of Callisto.

It was the force of Red Carson's character that brought the pirates together under his standard. He preyed only on barons' space cargo ships, never on tramp ships owned by their skippers. The richness of his loot, his brilliant space fighting tactics, and his economy with human lives made him highly popular with his men.

Rosalie became overwhelmed by Carson's subtle attentions. One morning she found a bunch of white and gold Callistan snow-flowers on her breakfast table. These flowers could be picked only by climbing the dangerous precipices of Callisto. Then Red Carson gave her microfilms of the latest Terra novels. There were more of such attentions, and then hate turned to love. She married him and became queen of the pirate colony in Callisto.

She remained faithful to Red after he was deposed, though his disgrace had cost her much in suffering. And though Konrad had offered her everything in the Solar System if she would abandon her mate, Rosalie still did not forsake him. All this was a year ago.

"Konrad did not really win the duel," she said, eying Hugh tenderly. "He sabotaged your space fighter. You couldn't maneuver her. He took advantage of it and downed you."

Hugh nodded. "Yes, and with minimum risk to his skin."

"Then why don't you break his blockade?" asked Rosalie. "Konrad is sly, but he is a poor tactician."

Rosalie wanted Hugh to return to society, to cease being an outlaw. To break Konrad's blockade was his supreme chance.

Hugh looked at her and shook his head.

"It will not work," he said. "I'm a wanted pirate here. If I make myself known, they'd shoot me at once. If Colonel Hanlon doesn't, Major Rose will. He's that type."

Rosalie sighed and went to the robotphone to order food. She stopped suddenly as though struck by some invisible object. She swayed, clutched wildly for supports out of reach. Her breath came in short, loud gasps. Her face flushed.

Alarmed, Hugh sprang to his feet—but she collapsed before he could reach her. Her head struck the floor with a dull thud.

With shaking fingers, Hugh forced her mouth open. There was a thick globule, dark and slimy, at the base of her throat. Soon there would be more of them and eventually enough to block the passage of air and thus choke her.

It was Nitrobacter Plague!

Frantic, Hugh put a call through to the emergency hospital. A nurse arrived and confirmed his fears. She ordered Rosalie to be taken to Quarantine.

Left alone, Hugh was crushed. For a long time, as he stared at the floor, intense despair and an utter hopelessness left him weak and trembling. He had not realized until then how much Rosalie meant to him.

He got up and walked to the window. He saw Phobos so bright and so tantalizing. Dots that marked Konrad's ships moved across the satellite's surface, a stern warning of impending doom. Flushing with rage, Hugh shook his fists at the ships.

Then all at once, Rosalie's last

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words rang in his ears, "Why don't you break Konrad's blockade?"

He looked again at the cruising ships in the air. He tried hard to recall the disposition of the pirate fleet as he had seen it through the Observatory's amplifying screen. It came, surprisingly clear.

"Yes, Rosalie," Hugh smiled grimly. "I will break Konrad's blockade and you will live."

* * * * *

Colonel Hanlon shook his head.

"No. Your plan is a mad scheme." He looked steadily at Hugh. "The pirates will get you before you are out of Mars' gravitation ring."

"It's my risk," Hugh pleaded. "I can do it!"

Again Colonel Hanlon shook his head.

"Sorry," he said stubbornly, "I appreciate your offer, but we have only three fighters. We can't risk any more."

"Do you mean to tell me that, while people are dying of Nitrobacter Plague, you are doing nothing?" Hugh's remarks were to the point, and Colonel Hanlon flushed.

Major Rose, the space fighter group commander, came to his superior's rescue.

"It seems to me," he said, eyeing Hugh with unconcealed contempt, "that in times of stress, *certain* people should not try to advise those who are charged with delicate duties and tell them what to do."

Hugh whirled on him. "But what delicate duty have *you* done so far?"

Major Rose and Colonel Hanlon glared at Hugh. Their refusal to listen to him and their obvious contempt only served to heighten his outraged self-respect. He suddenly was no longer Hugh, the beaten man. He became once more Hugh Red Carson, the swashbuckler, though neither Rose nor Hanlon knew his real identity.

Hugh advanced toward Rose's desk. Placing a hand on it, and leaning over, he spoke distinctly and slowly.

"Delicate duties cannot be accomplished merely by sitting down and hoping for the best."

Rose's hard eyes considered him a moment.

"We sent all the fighters we had," he said. "Only three returned."

Hugh laughed hard and loud. There was a contemptuous ring in his laughter that caused Rose to flush.

"What are you laughing at?" demanded Hanlon, furious.

Hugh whirled. "I'm laughing at your childish attempts to break Konrad's blockade. You did send fighters, yes, but you sent them into a trap. Oh, you call yourselves space fighters when you don't know the elements of tactics."

Rose sprang to his feet. Hanlon advanced toward him, reddening angrily.

"And while people die," he continued, "you keep the rest of your fighters here in case Konrad attacks. No, it isn't Konrad. He's too careful of his precious skin. He waits for us to die first before he lands. Don't forget he has access to serum and antitoxin in Phobos."

"Where did you learn so much about Konrad?" snarled Rose. "You must be a pirate yourself."

"That's right. I'm Red Carson."

Hugh's announcement stunned the officers. Rose recovered first and lanced toward him. But the ex-pirate had expected this, and before Rose had a chance to do anything he felt strong hands grip his arm and pull hard. He was thrown off balance and twisted around. Before he realized it, his back was pressed against Hugh's body, his arms pinioned behind him and he could not move.

THEN Hugh took Rose's blast gun out of its holster. He swung it full on Hanlon who had been running to help the major.

"Stay where you are," Hugh ordered. "I'm desperate."

Hanlon stopped, a little unbelieving.

"Don't move," Hugh warned again, "or there may be an accident!"

Hugh pushed Major Rose away, thus freeing his arm. He had both men covered.

"Since you're unwilling to let me have a fighter and carry out my little

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plan, I'll have to take one by force." Hugh spoke calmly but decisively. "I'm pretty desperate, don't forget that. Kindly give me your arm, Colonel Hanlon."

Hanlon swallowed hard and offered his right arm. Hugh tucked his left arm through Hanlon's right and thrust his right hand with the blast gun into his jacket.

"Look here. The gun's invisible, but it's aiming at you, nonetheless. You have my word I'll shoot you dead at the slightest provocation. Understand?"

Hanlon nodded. Hugh looked at Rose who also nodded understanding.

"All right, it's settled," said Hugh. "We're going to the spaceport. You will send your men away."

Guards and workers were surprised to see Colonel Hanlon come out of the Observatory, arm in arm with Hugh, an ordinary worker, and apparently on the friendliest terms. For, as they went, Hugh was joking and laughing briskly. Rose, walking a few paces ahead of them, did not laugh.

They reached the spaceport.

"Now shoo your tin soldiers away," Hugh hissed into Hanlon's ear.

Hanlon paused, but when he felt Hugh's pistol press against the small of his back, he gave the necessary orders. The guards saluted and boarded a rocket-powered ground transport.

When the guards disappeared, Hugh motioned to a fighter he had picked with a swift appraisal of her qualities.

"Now board that ship," he ordered.

Rose opened his mouth to protest, but when Hugh drew the gun out of his jacket and pointed it menacingly at him, he submitted without a word and boarded the ship followed by Colonel Hanlon. Not until they were standing in front of the outer airlock hatch, where he had ordered them to stop, did Hugh board.

Then he walked to the hatch door. "Get out!" he commanded them, swinging the gun to show the way out.

Rose and Hanlon sprang out, and the door slammed behind them. Hugh opened and closed the inner airlock door and raced toward the controls. He was gratified when the indicators told him that the radioactive carbon fuel casks were full, and the fixed atomic annihilators were loaded.

He sat down in the control wicker and shoved the T-stick backwards. Then he started the motors.

RED CARSON watched the deploying pirate ships through the little amplifying screen on his fighter. For a moment, his fingers handled the firing button on the T-stick, but he controlled his impulse to turn it on.

He was one against great odds and he had to use his head.

He let the pirates form a double line, making a trap into which they hoped to catch him. He knew that all guns were trained on him, and that the moment he was between the two lines, he would be blasted into atoms. But he kept going.

Then, just before the nose of his little fighter entered the death ring, he pulled the T-stick hard back. He felt a heavy jolt press his organs against his spine as the spacefighter's internal gravity shifted abruptly. He fought the suicidal tendency to let the stick go and sent his fighter skidding into the trap.

Then he heard, clear over the cosmic-radio:

"Hold fire! We'll be shooting at each other."

At once, he knew his plan had worked. His fighter skirted the very edge of the trap, just as the pirates' fingers were closing on the firing buttons. Grinning mirthlessly, he flipped on his cosmic-radio transmitting switch.

"Salute, the Brethren of Callisto!"

It was the pirate fleet's call, and added to the confusion that Hugh's maneuver had caused. And then came the voice of Konrad.

"Who is he that speaks thus?"

"It's I, Red Carson, coming back to challenge you to a duel, my dear Konrad. This time I have a sound spacefighter you didn't sabotage beforehand."

"Shoot him down!" shouted Konrad. "He's a traitor."

"Just a minute, darling," Hugh mocked. "You're so careful of your precious fat that you've left the dirty

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work to your men. See how safe you are, two thousand miles behind the advance scouts!"

Konrad did not reply, though Hugh imagined that he was sputtering with rage. Every pirate was listening.

"Come, come, my dear Konrad. If you're too frightened to fight me, why don't you say so? It's very unbecoming to a pirate to be bashful."

Hugh grinned broadly. Konrad had no other choice.

"I'll fight you," said Konrad.

Now Hugh saw Konrad's powerful spacefighter turn to meet him. He raced toward Konrad's fighter.

For a long time, the two spacefighters rushed at each other. Behind Hugh, the pirate ships approached, rendezvousing like ancient husky dogs to watch a mortal struggle of team leaders. Soon the details of Konrad's fighter were clear on Hugh's amplifying screen.

Since the distance was still too great for effective atomic annihilator fire, Hugh studied the maneuvers of Konrad's fighter. His antagonist appeared to be wobbly when turning to the left. Then Hugh settled back, at ease.

KONRAD started firing first, and long beams of atomic annihilator bolts reached out for Hugh's ship. They ended dangerously close to her nose. And then Hugh jammed the shifting gears and shoved the T-stick.

Hugh felt himself pressed against his wicker by the rapidly shifting internal gravity of his little fighter as he brought her skidding to the right of Konrad's spaceship. Konrad had been expecting Hugh to take advantage of his ship's tendency to wobble on left turns, and now he was confused. Then Hugh brought his fighter around, lancing at Konrad's right flank.

Hugh applied a little more of the T-stick until Konrad's fighter was squarely in the center of the etched cross-hairs of his amplifying screen. Then he jabbed the firing button.

His atomic annihilators sizzled hotly and beams shot forth toward Konrad. They bore into the ship's hull. Slowly the fighter disintegrated with a series of explosive bursts, then it mushroomed with a blinding bluish glare like a new born nova.

"Hail Red Carson, our leader again!"

The greeting was distasteful to Hugh. Rosalie was stricken with Nitrobacter Plague, and the only serum that could save her was in Phobos.

Hugh knew that the pirates would turn on him like a pack of wolves if he tried to call them off. Mars' treasure was within their grasp, and they were not going to let anyone stop them.

He had to consider a way of removing the pirates so that Rosalie would be saved. Then he saw the ammunition ship.

It was only a freighter, but it had particular significance for him. It was the same ship on which he had met Rosalie. Now, however, her spacious holds contained highly sensitive annihilator ammunition.

Hugh's eyes blazed strangely. He felt a mixture of inspiration and fatalism. With a set face, he flipped on the cosmic-radio transmitter switch.

"Brethren of Callisto, hear me closely. The enemy on Mars is gathering a fleet that, at this moment, is heading for the ammunition ship. Let all ships form a tight ring around the ammunition ship, and after we beat off the attack, the treasures of Mars are ours."

He watched the pirate ships apprehensively on the amplifying screen. If they saw through his deception, he was lost, and Rosalie would die. But they moved toward the ammunition ship as though carrying out his orders.

The pirates formed a tight ring around the ammunition ship. There was an empty spot at the head of the ring, a mute warning that he was expected to fight with them.

Slowly, he headed toward his place, taking his time so as not to arouse any suspicion. Now he was quite close to the ammunition ship, and he judged that the explosion would reach his ship too. He would have to act in a hurry.

Before he entered the ring, he

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gave an order, his voice sharp.

"Tighten ring further. A determined fighter can break through."

ALMOST automatically, as Hugh spoke, the pirate ships drew closer to the ammunition ship. Now it was impossible for opposing fighters to break through the ring without being bombarded by the pirates. On the other hand . . .

Hugh pressed hard on the accelerator. He was momentarily wedged into his wicker as the fighter suddenly spurted ahead, straight through the ring where his post was, head on toward the ammunition ship.

Then a volley of oaths passed through his cosmic radio.

"Shoot him! He's going to collide into the ammo ship! We'll be torn by the explosion!"

Hugh laughed mirthlessly. Then his fighter shook under the steady bombardment of hundreds of atomic annihilators. Something struck him hard on his head. Momentarily his vision blurred. And then his breath came in short, choking gasps.

Badly holed, the little fighter was rapidly losing its oxygen mixture into the empty space.

Hugh coughed and choked. His vision became more and more hazy.

Before merciful oblivion reached out for him, he saw the big hulk of the ammunition ship loom, rushing at him.

Then he jammed the accelerator harder and jabbed the firing button.

The last thing he did was to whisper, "Good-by Rosalie."

"Good Lord!" gasped Colonel Hanlon.

He had seen Hugh Red Carson's fighter collide into the ammunition ship. He fancied that her atomic annihilators sizzled just before she hit the freighter.

Then, on the amplifying screen, as Colonel Hanlon and Major Rose watched, the ammunition ship buckled. Brilliant blue flames shot out of her rent sides, engulfing pirate ship after pirate ship. And suddenly the stricken ship mushroomed with a blinding flash that blotted out the entire pirate fleet.

When the explosion died to an angry red glow that was the last of a once proud man-made space bird, not one pirate fighter was left.

"Red Carson meant what he said," Hanlon remarked. "It sounded incredible."

Major Rose reached for the robotphone.

"Shall I order our guards to arrest his wife?" he asked the Colonel.

Hanlon shook his head.

"No, it wouldn't be fair. Carson gave up his life for her, not for us. Leave her alone."

He got up and walked over to Rose.

"I'm afraid Carson was right about us," Hanlon said, with his hand on the major's shoulder. "We thought they were promoting us when they assigned us to Mars City. Actually they needed their best tactical brains for the war on Terra. We aren't that type. Let's admit it—privately though!"

Major Rose, reluctant to admit the truth, could not say anything.

"Red Carson made up for all the crimes charged against him when he gave up his life," Hanlon continued. "Officially he did it to free the colony—that's how we'll make our reports." Hanlon paused and then said, "Phone Quarantine and find out how Rosalie Saulnier—was that the name Carson used?—is making out."

Rose obeyed and picked up the robotphone. After a few minutes he came back.

"They've got her case under control, sir," he said. "She'll recover if serum's available soon."

Hanlon nodded. "So will many others. By the way, after Rosalie Saulnier recovers, we ought to see that she is rehabilitated. Perhaps she can be useful in some way."

"I think so," Rose answered. "Intelligence dossier on Red Carson says his wife was a chemist."

"That will do," Hanlon said. "Empty a couple of transports and take them to the serum cache in Phobos. Mars City owes its life to Red Carson."

Coming Soon: WINGS OF ICARUS, *an Interplanetary Novel by* RAY CUMMINGS

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Thrills in SCIENCE

Thumbnail Sketches of Great Men and Achievements by

OSCAR J. FRIEND

THE FIRST TORPEDO EVER UNLEASHED!

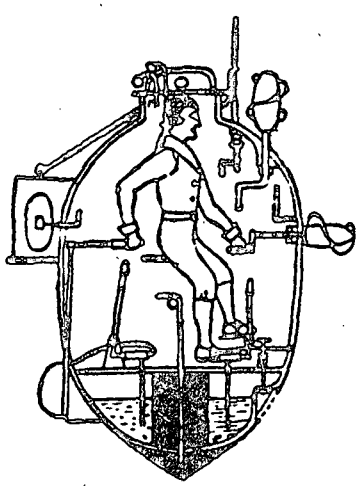
David Bushnell's Inventions Make Maritime History

TWO men stood in the shade of the big elm tree before the village smithy and curiously watched the actions of the gangling boy with the roguish, impish face and unruly hair.

"What in tarnation is young Davey Bushnell doing now?" asked the first.

"I don't rightly know," replied the blacksmith. "He begged a piece of iron bar from me this morning—a short, heavy chunk of metal with a flat, smooth bottom."

Over in a cleared space David Bushnell was busily engaged in the summer sunshine. He had nailed two strips of wood together to form a v-shaped trough which he now propped in an almost vertical position atop



Cross section of the Turtle, David Bushnell's one-man submarine, in which an attempt was made to destroy the British fleet in New York harbor in 1776

a smooth bit of honest Connecticut granite outcropping.

On the rock itself just at the base of the crude trough he placed an iron collar which was a discarded bit from a Concord coach. Into this ring he poured a small handful of whitish-yellow powder which he had mixed himself, a compound of sulphur, sugar and potassium chlorate.

Carefully he rested the bit of iron begged from the blacksmith upon the powder within the ring. Then he stood behind the head of the trough, looked around with a wide, mischievous grin, and placed a heavy cylindrical stone in the top of his v-shaped trough. With the air of a ship's gunner taking aim, he steadied the rock and let it go.

The stone flashed down the trough to strike the upper end of his improvised hammer, smashing it down to compress the powder against the granite. Instantly there was a loud report, a flash of light and smoke—and the trough and boy were sent reeling backward.

David Bushnell had fired off a home-made torpedo.

"Drat that boy!" exclaimed the startled blacksmith. "Always fooling around with some sort of explosive. Some day he's going to blow his fool head off!"

Instead of that, however, the following day David shot off the smith's anvil and smashed in the side of the water tub for cooling wagon rims and horseshoes. The sound of the ringing, booming anvil brought folks at a run, and after the excitement died down, young David's experiments were summarily curtailed by his irate father.

Shooting off anvils—by firing gunpowder tamped in the chuck hole—was a sport that lasted well into the twentieth century, a time-honored method of celebrating the Fourth of July. The only trouble about David's celebration was that it took place in the year of 1757, nineteen years before the American Declaration of Independence.

Born in Saybrook, Connecticut, in 1742, all of his life David Bushnell was interested in and curious about explosives. Living in a day before the invention of guncotton, nitroglycerine, TNT and other modern high-power explosives, David knew only the action of gunpowder of various mixtures.

He graduated from Yale in 1775, in plenty of time to join the forces of the American Revolution. Quite naturally he gravitated to the corps of sappers and miners, becoming a captain in the service. During the course of the war he was on duty at New York, Hudson Highlands, Philadelphia, Yorktown and elsewhere.

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Early he realized the stifling danger of the British warships which clogged every large port and the mouth of every sizeable stream. Never having forgotten his first interest in making explosives do new and unusual tricks, he conceived the idea of blowing up British ships by exploding an underwater charge of powder against their hulls.

His idea seemed so ingenious that he sold the Continental Congress on the scheme and received permission to construct the first fighting submarine. The *American Turtle* was a tortoise-shaped diving boat which was propelled by a hand-driven screw and was capable of staying submerged for thirty minutes. It was guided by a compass made visible by phosphorus.

This part of his plan ready, Bushnell, an ardent soldier now at the age of thirty-four, proceeded to manufacture the first submarine torpedo.

He prepared a one-hundred-pound charge of gunpowder in a waterproof packet to be towed by a line from the *American Turtle* and attached to the underwater hull of the British frigate *Eagle* by a screw. An ingenious clockwork, set going as the charge drifted against the hull of the vessel, was to set off the blast by electric spark.

The only trouble was that Captain Bushnell found the bottom of the *Eagle* sheathed in copper, and he couldn't attach his embryo torpedo to the hull. Hence, this attempt was a failure.

However, later, in 1777, Bushnell made a second attempt to prove his invention, this time against the British frigate *Cerberus*, anchored off New London. He missed the right ship and blew up a schooner astern of the *Cerberus*, killing several men aboard.

This partial success was hailed with delight by the American forces, vindicating David Bushnell's theory. The first vessel in maritime history had been destroyed by the first torpedo!

From this early exploit with a charge of gunpowder exploded by clockwork after being towed into position by a crude underwater craft, it is a far cry to the Luppis-Whitehead torpedoes and the aerial torpedoes in use today, but the scientific ingenuity of a Yankee brought into being the forefather of that modern engine of destruction—the torpedo! While David Bushnell did not live to see vast improvement in his idea and design (dying as a physician in Warrington, Georgia, in 1824) he had ushered in a new era.

Not only had he invented the torpedo. In January, 1778, he sent a fleet of powder kegs down the Delaware River to destroy British ships holding the river mouth and against which fire-ships had been ineffectual.

Owing to darkness, the kegs were set adrift at too great a distance from the objective and were carried farther out to sea and dispersed by the ice. During the next day they started exploding, blowing up a small boat and occasioning no little alarm.

While being the inspiration of Francis Hopkinson's humorous poem, "The Battle of the Kegs," it is quite likely that this was the first application of the floating mine. Thus, Bushnell has two highly prized naval inventions to his credit.

A MAN OF STEEL

How Henry Bessemer Hit Upon His Great Idea!

IT really began when his sister came to Henry Bessemer one day and asked him to letter the cover of a folio of her flower paintings. Although they were English, and Henry himself was born at Charlton, Hertfordshire, their father had been a French artist.

The family being in moderate circumstances, young Henry was both amazed and angry when, upon accepting this little task, to learn that the so-called gold powder for lettering cost about twenty-six dollars per pound—although it was made from maybe eighteen cents' worth of brass.

"That's outrageous!" Henry fumed. "I'm going to find a way to make gold powder cheaper."

The lettering took several days, and Henry had plenty of time to fret over the cost of it all. Thus, his resolve did not die down and become forgotten like so many flaming resolves of youth. It stayed with him, and he soon set to work on it.

The first thing he learned was that the prohibitive cost was due to the expensive and laborious process of manufacture. Having assimilated all facts he could glean on the business, in company with his three brothers-in-law, he began experimenting. Matters shortly passed into a stage of production.

They machined cast billets and passed the filings through heavy rollers that broke the filaments up into coarse powder. Then they polished the grains by adding small quantities of olive oil and got the best results by dropping the resultant product from a height.

But still Henry wasn't satisfied with the result until he hit upon the happy idea of blowing the powder through a tunnel about forty feet long and catching the finest material dust in silk bags at the far end. A simple process, indeed—after one knew what to do.

And what began as a revolt against a ridiculously disproportionate price ended in a lucrative business that lasted for forty years and solidly founded Henry Bessemer's fortune.

Thus, in 1856, when Bessemer was forty-three years old, he little dreamed that the method he had hit upon in the making of gold and bronze powder which had made him his fortune was to be directly responsible for making him one of the most famous inventors of history and the father of the steel age.

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Prior to 1870 the principal metallic materials of construction were cast iron and wrought iron. While there can be no doubt that iron and a crude form of steel was known to the ancients, the use of charcoal to make carbon steel was primitively applied before Henry Bessemer turned his attention to it.

In 1856 Bessemer was studying the matter of guns and cannons. At that time there was cast iron and wrought iron. Cast iron could be made quite hard by the charcoal treatment, but then it became brittle. Wrought iron resisted shock and recoil excellently, but it was comparatively soft. There was a need for a metal which could be strong and tough and wear-resistant, but there was no known method of making such steel in quantity for, say, railroad rails and big guns.

Blister steel was, and still is, made by packing wrought iron bars in a long stone box full of charcoal and heating the container for several days at a full red. The carbon of the charcoal is gradually absorbed by the iron, which becomes therefore steel.

Henry Bessemer learned that a great many impurities remained in the iron by this slow method and he fretted at the necessary oxygen for the refining process having to be carried into the product in the form of iron oxide—in the form of ore or iron silicate slag. After the oxygen was used the impurities remained. How to get them out?

At home Bessemer talked about his problem. "If only we didn't have to put them in!" he grumbled.

"Why do you then?" asked his sister.

Bessemer glanced at her in faint disapproval. "Because there has to be oxygen added," he explained. "It's the oxygen that's needed."

"Why can't you draw oxygen out of the air?" she asked. "You used air to blow your gold powder, didn't you?"

Henry Bessemer opened his mouth to make an impatient retort. And left it hanging open as he stared at his sister.

"What's the matter, Henry?" she asked. "Did I say something silly?"

"On the contrary, my dear, you have given me an idea," he answered humbly. And he abruptly left the dinner table and rushed to his study to do some figuring.

The problem was by no means solved even if the idea would work, because there remained the Herculean task of successfully introducing air into the molten metal. But Henry Bessemer remembered his wind tunnel for blowing his gold powder and quickly grasped the workable principle that a blast of air driven through the molten iron would surrender directly enough oxygen for refining.

The upshot of the matter was that Bessemer designed a furnace lined with fire brick which had holes in the bottom through which he could drive a powerful blast of compressed air up into the molten iron. On trial his method not only purified the iron, but instead of blowing cold and freezing, the metal became hot enough to remain molten even when all the carbon

Henry Bessemer

was gone and hitherto infusible pure iron remained.

It took a number of years of experimentation before the new process became a commercial success, but the theory was perfect, and before long high-quality steel was pouring from Bessemer Blast Furnaces in a continuous stream twenty-four hours per day. In 1867 460,000 tons of iron rails were made and sold for $83 per ton. By 1884 steel rails had replaced them to an annual production of one and one-half million tons per year, selling at the unprecedented low price of $32 per ton.

For the second time in his life Henry Bessemer had put a blast of air to work for him and had made himself truly a man of steel.

"GOT A MATCH, BUD?"

The Discovery of Charles Sauria, Bringer of Light

ASKING for a match is a careless little request, one that is made thousands of times a day—and as carelessly granted. For matches seem to be as plentiful, as free, and almost as cheap as air and water. Recently some mathematician calculated that matches are consumed at the rate of about twelve per day for every human being in the world—about two billion—or twenty-four billion matches every twenty-four hours.

Whether this estimate includes the crop

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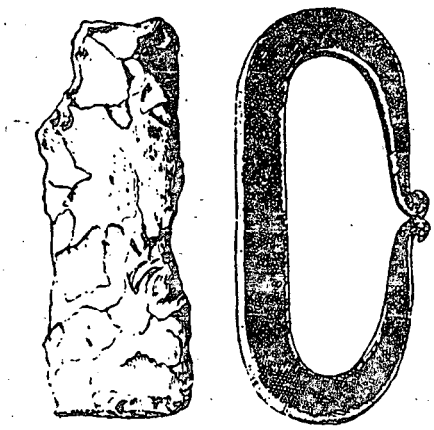
of pipe smokers who use a folder of safety matches to smoke one pipeful of tobacco we do not know.

But we do know this: It was not always so. In fact, matches have become plentiful only within the last one hundred years. Ask any boy scout the quickest way to start a fire today and the chances are he will promptly tell you to strike a match—the application of inflammable chemicals and friction. But ask for the history of the match, and very few people can tell you.

In the winter of 1830, working away in the gloomy confines of the apothecary's laboratory in Saint Lothair, western Germany, where he was employed as an apprentice, an eighteen-year-old Polish youth was pondering on this very subject.

Charles Sauria was mentally reviewing the history of the match as he busily trimmed out pine slivers by hand and set them to soaking in a solution of sulphur.

"It is so queer," young Sauria reflected to himself, "that it was eight hundred years



Flint and Steel

after the Arab, Bechel, discovered phosphorus in the ninth century before man found it possible to obtain quick light by the friction of sulphur and phosphorus. Indeed, the alchemist, Brand of Hamburg, had to rediscover phosphorus in sixteen-seventy by accident before Godfrey Haukwitz and Robert Boyle of London stumbled onto the secret in the sixteen-eighties."

"And what was his method, may I ask?" demanded Sauria's master, coming into the laboratory in time to hear his assistant's words.

"Haukwitz learned that he could rub small particles of phosphorus between folds of brown paper containing a sulphur-impregnated taper, and the resultant flame produced a light," answered young Sauria promptly. "But the procedure was both costly and dangerous."

"So?" prompted his master, picking up a knife and engaging in the work of producing slivers of wood.

"So then came the 'phosphorus bottle,'" went on Sauria thoughtfully. "This was a vial containing a piece of phosphorus which had been stirred about by a hot wire in order to coat the inside of the bottle with phosphorus oxide. When a light was desired a sulphur match was thrust into the bottle and thus ignited. But this was inconvenient and costly and not always dependable. So Chancel of Paris invented the 'oxymuriate match,' introducing the use of acid and potassium chlorate. Which was more dangerous than ever. Then Derepos invented a mixture of phosphorus and magnesia in eighteen hundred and nine which worked indifferently well."

"After which," added the apothecary, "came the brimstone match, a sliver of pine with a sulphur tip which is ignited like tinder by a spark from flint and steel. Safe and satisfactory—and which I am paying you to make."

"And we are just about back to where it started," added Sauria sadly. "A match that has to be struck like tinder. Why, only three years ago that English druggist named John Walker invented a friction match with all the chemical elements of sulphur, potassium and phosphorus on the tip which strikes on sandpaper."

"Yes, I know," said his master. "It is called the Congreve match for that English lord, and it pops and explodes—or doesn't work at all, and it sells for a shilling for only eighty-four matches, half of which are no good. This brimstone match is the best."

"But there *must* be a way to improve the match," insisted Sauria earnestly. "All the ingredients are known. If only we could hit upon the right combination!"

"Nonsense!" snorted his master. "You are a dreamer, Charles. Get along with your work. I am having the walls of your bedchamber painted this week, painted white so you will not be complaining always about the light."

Thus, the subject was dropped. But Charles Sauria continued to think about it. Privately he began to experiment in the laboratory with varying formulas of chemicals and glues to perfect a safe and workable match.

He took to carrying batches of his home-made matches in his pockets. Every chance he got he read journals and papers on the subject. But with no successful results.

Until the night he came home late from a political meeting and found the house dark and everybody in bed. He made his way to his room that January night in 1831, fishing in his pocket for one of his regular brimstone matches and groping in the dark for the flint and steel which lay on the table.

Then, the hand holding a match accidentally extended before him, he tripped on the floor matting and fell against the newly painted wall. The head of the match touched the rough plastering and scraped downward. Lo, a miracle happened. There was a faint splutter, an arcing line of phosphorescence, a puff—and he held a brightly flaming match aloft in his hand.

He was so amazed he nearly dropped the blazing splinter. Then, recovering, in an agony of impatience he lighted his lamp and began testing matches upon the wall

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until the marks he made indicated that the room was sadly in need of repainting.

But this didn't worry young Sauria. He was hot on the trail of a miracle. Somehow, he had struck a safe and perfectly good match to light. By morning the solution came to him.

Only a certain kind of match would work, and that kind worked every time. This was a match with a head containing potassium chlorate and sulphur, held together by a gluey compound. But there was no phosphorus in this particular batch of matches he had made. And without phosphorus there could be no fire.

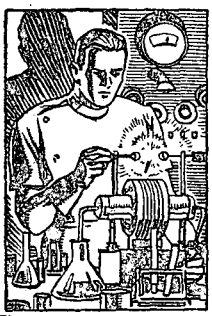
And with daylight stealing in at his window Charles Sauria stared at the scarred wall in perplexity. Suddenly he leaped to his feet and examined the wall.

"That's it!" he shouted aloud. "Phosphorus! There is white phosphorus in the wall paint!"

And there it was. Thus, accidentally, Charles Sauria had stumbled upon the proper formula for a friction match that could be safely lighted. More than this, by the accident of having the phosphorus ingredient incorporated in the striking surface instead of in the head of the match, Sauria had really discovered the first safety match.

Unfortunately Sauria failed to patent his process, and he could not honestly claim to be the inventor of the friction match, but he had become the creator of the first successful lucifer!

In truth, Charles Sauria is the father of the modern match. There remained only improvements. Professor Anton von Schrötter discovered red phosphorus in 1845, thus removing the poisonous quality of matches, and Lundstrom of Jönköping applied the safety idea in 1855 by putting this ingredient in the side of the matchbox. There remained only the coming of the modern match-making machines which now turn out millions of perfect and boxed matches per hour.



SATAN'S DEPUTY

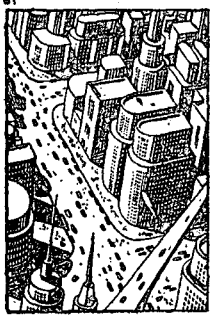
UNCOVERS A DIABOLICAL FIFTH COLUMN!

Alex Craig, Lucifer in a Full Dress Suit, Pops Up Whenever You Happen to

SPEAK OF THE DEVIL

in the astounding novel of that name

By NORMAN A. DANIELS



that packs amazing and ingenious surprises on every page!

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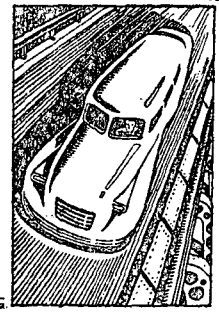

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The West City gladiator's knife flashed in an upward sweep

The GLADIATORS

By WALT DENNIS and ERNEST TUCKER

After Three Thousand Years of Synthetic Life Under The Domes, a Handful of Rebels Face a Fearsome Doom!

TEDOR Kaj, East City warrior, advanced warily through the thick forest. He froze into immobility as something which didn't belong there made the ferns near the edge of the little brook quiver. Whatever it was hadn't seen him; the quivering continued.

Tedor's long, straight knife was ready in his hand. He had long since shot the two arrows the Council allowed him, and with his ten-foot rope he had contrived a snare which had handily caught and strangled one of the fighters from West City.

The ferns parted slowly as Tedor watched, tense. He was sure this was the West City gladiator he had been tracking through the forests of the Third Dome. A head emerged, cautiously peering across the tiny rivulets—a head which bore a blue skull

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cap. It belonged to the enemy.

The West City man, apparently satisfied no foes were in the vicinity, bent to drink. Tedor leaped.

With a startled grunt, the other rose to one knee as Tedor hurtled across the stream and flung himself on the blue-capped one, whose knife flashed in a deadly upsweep which nearly disemboweled the attacker.

Handling the knives like short swords, the two faced each other before Blue-cap, teeth bared, lunged. Tedor parried and launched a vicious jab which ripped the other's sleeve and drew blood.

They closed, knives grinding together, left hands groping to catch right arms. Blue-cap was young, several years younger than Tedor; he bore no silver stars on the dun leather of his tunic. It was his first combat.

Blue-cap whirled quickly, straightened his arm and lunged full-length at Tedor, who, with ease of long training and many battles, dropped to one knee, caught the outstretched arm and with lightning turn rose and dumped the West City warrior to the ground.

Tedor knew better than to allow his adversary to recover. Cat-quick, he threw himself atop his fallen foe, smothered the deadly knife with his left arm and plunged his own weapon deep into Blue-cap's side.

It was over. Slowly Tedor Kaj rose, gazing down at his vanquished enemy and brought his knife up in salute.

"A quiet sleep, comrade!" he muttered under his breath. "You fought a good fight." It was the traditional tribute of a gladiator to a fallen foe.

AS Tedor's knife dropped into its scabbard, the deep notes of a gong sounded through the forest. With the death of Blue-cap, a death witnessed by fifty thousand avid pairs of eyes, a little blue light had winked out in the ten thousand charts of the Third Dome in the two cities. Three blue lights still glowed, but there were nine green lights still lighted of the original twelve and the West City Council, by touching a button which sounded the gong, had conceded defeat and so ended the games.

Tedor Kaj was tired. Three days ago—they of the Three Domes still reckoned time in days and hours, meaningless as the words were now—he and the others of the twelve had plunged into the forests of the Third Dome, knowing that three miles away, at its other extremity, twelve Blue-caps also were entering the trees.

For three days the eyes of two cities had been on them as they prowled the woods, haunted the clearings, followed trails like the Indians of old. All their skill in woodcraft, trained into them by years of practice as cadets, had been needed. Hunt or be hunted, keep clear of the paths, read the signs in the grass. And when an enemy was sighted—kill!

It was these combats which were the reason for the existence of the gladiators. That was their business; that was the way they repaid the city for the food and light and air it gave them, furnishing entertainment twice a year by slaying or being slain to put color into the gray lives of the People of the Dome.

Five Blue-caps had Tedor met and three he had killed. He, himself, had been near death in an ambuscade until the sudden appearance of a fellow Green-cap had turned the tables. Only two others of his twelve had he seen, one of them dead.

During the span of the games every movement he had made had been recorded faithfully by a little green light moving over the face of a scale map of the Third Dome. He had been under almost constant scrutiny of the people of both cities, clustered around thousands of telion plates to watch their respective warriors.

The games were high points in the life of the two cities. For them Tedor Kaj had been chosen by the Council of East City when he was five, the age when all children underwent an exhaustive series of tests to determine their capabilities.

He had quickness of perception and could act instinctively in emergencies, attributes no one else needed. In the cities there were no emergencies. He had learned to handle archaic weapons. To develop a deep sense of patriotism

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and loyalty he had read and re-read, in ancient and forgotten scripts, tales of heroism and sacrifice.

He was a gladiator. In him and in the eleven others of the twelve who fought in the games until they were killed was the pride of East City. They were a race apart. Ordinary citizens, machine tenders or food testers and the like, looked on the gladiators with awe.

Yet the price for this adulation was high. Life hung by a slim thread in those last forests of Earth beneath the Third Dome where the games were held.

THE trees were green and inviting to Tedor Kaj and the little brook he was following looked cool. He could take time now, to look about him at the grass and flowers he saw so seldom. He tried to imagine what Earth had looked like covered with them, how the grass had shone in the full brilliance of the sun instead of the cold artificial light which dispelled the gloom of the Third Dome.

He shook his head impatiently. Something primitive inside him made him hate to leave the Third Dome and go back to East City with its narrow corridors and tightly-packed dwelling cubicles.

He knew the rest of the first twelve, and other warriors down to the fourteen-year old cadets, felt as he did. The cramped, rigid life of the First Dome stifled them.

Why could not have men, in those ancient times when they lived outside the Domes, have lived in peace—or at least have appointed gladiators to do their fighting for them? Why did they have war, eternal and ruthless war, which had finally blasted the face of Earth?

It had been thousands of years ago, in the last year of all, when one nation, beaten and desperate, had loosed the final, frightful plague—the product of John Kinning, most brilliant chemist of his generation. He had produced an ingredient which, combining with the harmless nitrogen in the air, had made the atmosphere of earth unbreathable.

Even John Kinning had not foreseen what would follow. The transmuted air itself had become an agent; the ring of death spread ever faster.

It was ancient history, but Tedor dimly remembered his history as he walked beside the stream.

John Kinning, appalled by the destruction he had wrought, saw the world strangling before his eyes and in the last flare of his genius designed the huge Domes in which what was left of humanity—its wars and strife instantly forgotten in the universal terror—had taken refuge before the inexorable wave of death engulfed it.

There were three Domes, one each housing the two cities and the forested Third Dome lying between the other two, all connected with deep tunnels. His last act finished, John Kinning remained outside to face the death his own genius had created.

Twenty-five thousand people were apportioned to each city those long milleniums ago. There were twenty-five thousand in each now. There was no room for growth.

The forest thinned as Tedor walked along, gave way to tall, rank grass which grew to the edge of the Third Dome. Tedor could see the delegation from East City waiting for him—bald councillors, pallid over-seers of food or water, and a little knot of gladiators. With a sudden lift in his heart he saw also the graceful form of a girl whom he recognized as Flori, sister of Broni Deda.

AS always, the surge of joy quickly was followed by a pang. Gladiators could not marry until they had completed twenty games. Only one fighter had done that in all the long history of the games.

"Tedor!" The girl was running toward him. "Oh, I'm so glad you're not hurt! We saw Broni fighting over near the rock pool through the telion. He killed his man, but fell over the edge of the rock and broke his ankle. I'm so happy these games are over, for a while, anyway."

Flori Leda was a vividly beautiful girl. She had to be; that was as much part of her business as fighting was

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Tedor's. She was one of the Singers, the troupe of girls whose singing and acting over the telion dispelled some of the workers' monotony.

Her dark-brown, curly hair floated in a veil around her face and her short-sleeved jacket and brief skirt of East City green covered a gloriously curved body.

Tedor could see tears in her brown eyes, although she was smiling—tears of relief that these games were over and of fear of what the next ones would bring.

Tedor heard a sound behind him and he turned.

"Look, Flori!" he said. "There's Broni now!"

From the trees limped a gladiator, supporting himself on a crotched stick. Tedor smiled as he saw Broni was not hurt badly. He ran toward his friend, the girl and another gladiator following.

"Take his other arm, Jon Nara," Tedor said. "I suppose the clumsy oaf tripped and fell."

Broni grinned. "I did just that. I was following you, trying to keep you from hurting yourself, when four Blue-caps jumped on me at once. I put up a magnificent battle! They—"

Whoops of derision from the other gladiators silenced him.

"Listen to him! If he even saw a Blue-cap he'd break through the side of the Dome! I think he broke his ankle running away from his own shadow!"

The battle was over; the dead comrades never again would be mentioned in conversation. The gladiators, scrambling into the swift car which would carry them underground to East City, threw insults at each other which would have earned an outsider a broken head, and piled outrageous boast on outrageous boast—even as generations of gladiators had done before them.

Flori laughed delightedly, but others in the car listened uncomprehendingly. This was beyond their ken. Quietly they had been born, quietly they went about their assigned jobs, quietly they would die and be cremated. So it was that the extravagant, boisterous imaginations of these young men who lived always on death's threshold were foreign to them. They all knew gladiators were a bit mad.

THE victorious gladiators had toured the city in triumph. From the hall of their barracks near the wall of the Dome they could hear the still jubilant citizens outside. Some millions of credits had changed hands as result of the games and the people were making the most of their brief holiday.

Flori sat with her brother and Tedor Kaj, eating the tiny pellets which substituted for vitamins and calories their active lives made so necessary.

"Listen to them!" she said, wrinkling her nose. "Poor things, they get so little pleasure. Tomorrow they'll all be back at their dull jobs."

Tedor laughed a little. "Their lives are just as artificial as this tasteless stuff we're chewing on. I can't imagine an existence like that. Six hours work, three hours relaxation, six hours sleep, three hours relaxation again. . . . what in the name of Tigra Yan do they do with their three hours?"

"Mostly listen to Flori and the other Singers on the telion," Broni said gloomily, staring at his food. "This is terrible stuff. At least we get something worth eating once in a while. That's the compensation for being a gladiator. I wish it didn't take so much energy to produce these counterfeit steaks. They're not bad."

"Has it ever occurred to you," Flori said, "how different you gladiators—and we Singers, too—are from the rest of the people? Gil Taaret, for example. He knows all there is to know about Valve Sixteen in the oxygen plant. Everything about that and nothing at all about anything else. That's his life."

"They know everything about one thing, we know a little something about everything," Tedor answered slowly. "That's the difference. Myself, I'd rather be dead than drag out any such life. Here come the councillors with the report of the games."

He raised his voice. "Roh Tili!

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Orta Goran! Get everyone in here; the cadets, too!"

The councillors came in slowly, pallid and soft little men, the green torches of their rank embroidered on their white tunics. They looked vastly out of place in the long, low hall with the giant, athletic figures of the gladiators towering over them and the walls hung with heroic weapons and trophies.

Those weapons told mutely of a glorious past—of Tigra Yan, only gladiator to survive twenty games, and of Ilso Nar Jat who had killed eight Blue-caps in a single day. And there was the ancient sword of the first gladiator, Tom Lerri, glazed with the soft patina of age—the sword that was reverently used when a cadet received the accolade which made him a full-fledged gladiator.

Quickly the hall filled with fighting men in their leaf-green tunics, some of them wearing silver stars, each which bespoke the wearer's part in a game. The First Councillor waited until all had taken their places, then moved forward until he stood in the center of the room.

Tedor Kaj looked about as the thin, reedy voice of the First Councillor began a detailed report of what had happened during the last games.

Tedor was proud of his fighters, standing silently, listening to the record of their exploits. Broni Leda, Roh Tili, Jon Nara—where was Thorek Ky Jana? Then he remembered. Thorek, of the never-failing smile, lay dead of an arrow in the heart somewhere in the Third Dome, in company with two of his comrades.

Tomorrow there would be a ceremony in the Square of the Gladiators, and the three Green-caps' names would be engraved, with their stars, on the column there. The silver eagle-badges, taken from their tunics, would be placed in the hall with the thousands of others.

PERHAPS, thought Tedor, in another half-year they would be placing his eagle on the wall. That was the way he expected to go—indeed, he wanted no other end. For, with the other gladiators in this atheistic city, he firmly believed in a Valhalla where the souls of comrades killed in battle would be reunited to laugh and boast and fight again their battles. And overhead would be the Sun, which none of them had seen in life.

A line from an ancient rhyme came to him—"to die with a smile on his lips."

How much better to live like that for a short span of years than to eke out a long existence turning a wheel! His eyes strayed to meet Flori's. He smiled at her, then turned his attention to the councillor's words.

"Tedor Kaj is awarded a seventh star for his part in the games. Roh Tili is awarded his third. Jon Nara is awarded his first and given a permanent place among the First Twelve."

Five others only, in the centuries since there had been gladiators, had earned seven stars. Usually during the games, one side or the other was completely exterminated and the victors had only two or three men left.

Tedor frowned a little. Broni Leda's name had not been mentioned. He should have won his fourth star.

"To fill the vacancies on the roster of the First Twelve, the Council appoints Doron Jodol, Kri Wessa, Orta Na Ganor and Dac Lissi."

"Four? There are but three vacancies!" Tedor was on his feet, shouting.

The other gladiators, amazed, turned to stare at him. He had interrupted a councillor, an unheard of occurrence.

The First Councillor merely glanced up a moment and continued reading:

"Names of those who died, with their stars, shall be inscribed on the Pillar of Gladiators. As the hurt of Broni Leda leaves him unfit to fight, it is the will of the Council that he be put to death."

The gladiators sat in stunned silence, but only for a moment. Tedor again jumped to his feet, white with anger.

"What do you mean? Broni's wound

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is slight. He already is walking."

The councillors frowned. These men were always hard to control.

"It is the law. Broni Leda always will limp. He can fight no more. Why then should the city support him? The law reads that when a man is no longer able to perform his assigned duty, he shall be put to death."

"No!" The gladiators cried with one voice.

Broni was popular. Flori, pale, was holding tightly to her brother's clenched hand. Tedor, brawny muscles rippling under his tunic, strode to the councillor.

"Such a law is all right for a dome inspector or water mixer. Never has it been enforced on a gladiator!" he protested.

"It has never needed to be," the First Councillor said coldly. "In the past a gladiator has come back whole or not at all. If Broni Leda's wound would heal completely he would be restored."

THE councillor, seeing Tedor's jaw muscles tighten, held up a hand imperiously.

"Enough. It is the law."

Then Tedor Kaj, his voice cracking with fury and disgust, committed blasphemy:

"The law! Burn the law!" He seized the immaculate white tunic of the First Councillor in one huge fist. "Your law is made for machines, not men! Most of you in the cities are machines! You feel not, sense not, know nothing of friendship, humanity, loyalty. For all your science you are ants in an anthill! You'll make no insects of us!"

Roars of approving sound echoed from the history-hung walls as the gladiators voiced their feelings for Broni Leda and for Tedor's words, which expressed their own long-leashed thoughts. Eagerly they crowded forward. The First Councillor, unafraid, stepped back contemptuously.

"You!" His voice was heavy with the weight of centuries of inbred command. "You throwbacks to the primitive! Friendship? Loyalty? Meaningless superstitions. There is no room for these in the cities. You were picked as gladiators because even as children your tests showed you wouldn't fit. You are the animals of today, but even for you the law is supreme. Broni Leda dies. And the rest of you will begin practice at once for the next games."

TEDOR KAJ loosed his hand from the other's mantle, crossed his arms and faced the councillor defiantly as he said:

"Not I! Restore Broni Leda or find another leader for the First Twelve. I'll fight no more if he dies!"

Roh Tili leaped to his side. Jon Nara followed instantly.

"Nor I! Nor I!" the hall became a melee of shouting men.

Tedor gazed steadily at the First Councillor, who gave no sign of emotion at the outbreak. "You see? Release Broni Leda or you'll have no gladiators. Animals, are we?"

The pallid little official turned to go. "Primitive heroics were manifest in a primitive world, Tedor Kaj. Here the law is supreme and you will obey. Broni Leda will die. And you'll fight as ordered. If not—do you remember what happened to Tom Bari?"

Tedor's eyes glinted at the menace in the councillor's words. Yes, all gladiators knew of Tom Bari, who refused to obey an edict of the Council. He had been put through the airlock of the Dome and had been left to die horribly in the outer world. Tense with anger at this mitelike but mighty caricature of a human before him, Tedor felt a desire to crush the First Councillor with a blow. His voice trembled with anger.

"Do you wheel-turners think you can put us anywhere you want to? Do you think we twelve with the reserves and cadets couldn't make ourselves rulers of the city?"

"No," the councillor answered, his metallic voice quiet with certainty. "What could you do with knives and arrows? Do you imagine we haven't kept some weapons from the barbaric past which could obliterate you all in a moment?"

He repeated coldly, finally. "You will obey the law."

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Closer the gladiators drew about the councillors. The crisis of generations was nearing a peak from which none knew what horrors might arise when suddenly Broni Leda stepped between Tedor and the First Councillor, his hand upraised.

"Hold, comrades," he said. "What difference is it to me whether I go now or within a few months, if we all die because we break the law? Death is not important to us, Tedor. It is our life. It is part of our training. Let us not consider my case as something beyond anyone else's."

Tedor silenced him with a gesture.

"We are trained for death in battle, Broni, not seated quietly in a gas chamber! I say again, I do not fight unless you are released!"

Again the thunder of approval sounded. Flori came forward, eyes blazing with resolve, and faced the First Councillor, who even must look up to her.

"And you'll have no more telion entertainment. My singers are with the gladiators and my brother. The issue has come, Councillor. Are we insects as you say, or are we human beings?"

Impassively the councillor inspected the ring of angry faces.

"We are going now," he said. In all the debate he had spoken scarcely above a whisper. "The Council shall return soon and give its verdict." He looked at Flori. "Since the singers are concerned in this, assemble them here," he ordered.

The Council withdrew, and Flori followed it into the still-echoing corridors of the First Dome. The gladiators broke into quiet groups, feeling the importance of this rift, relieved the crisis had come at last.

Tedor's forehead creased into a frown. Flori had said aright; it was the test. The gladiators and singers were the sole remaining links with the past life outside the Domes. The other folk were products of an alien new philosophy and age. The gap between them could never be bridged.

How many times he had felt the hunger for the trees, for that sky of which he had read in brittle old books but had never seen. Broni and Roh Tili and others had a similar yearning, he knew, the same inarticulate call which the stereotyped, super-ordered life in the Domes could never answer.

The singers came in, their beauty and conversation brightening the solemn military aspect of the hall, but their normal gaiety subdued. Evidently Flori had told them of what was transpiring.

The Council soon returned and the First Councillor again took his place in the center of the room, beginning without preamble:

"We have seen this outburst coming for a long time. The Council has ever been aware that you individuals would never fit in with the ideal for which we strive. By heredity and training you are primitives. Perhaps you cannot control what you do. You have been tolerated and supported by the city for the diversion you gave the people, yet we knew sometime the crisis between the two ways of life would come.

"I will tell you now the Council—as agreed with the Council of West City—has decided the time has come to end the games. There will be no more cadets chosen. You were to have been allowed to continue in the games until you all had died. But, as Flori Leda has said, this is the test. We cannot allow your dangerous atavism to corrupt the ordered pattern we have designed. You must obey or you will cease to exist."

A STIR ran through the gathering, and Flori shivered at the chill in the First Councillor's soft tones. The official was so cold—so impersonal! The councillor's face, thin and smooth under his domelike forehead, showed a faint wrinkle as he continued:

"We have power enough in our atomic motors to reclaim the earth and to regenerate the air, if we had to, but we do not wish it. It would lead only to the old, restless turmoil. We are satisfied here; you are the misfits."

Broni Leda interrupted, "Yet the turmoil you decry represents life,

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while your colorless, drab obedience to rules is a living death."

The councillor paid no heed, raised his hand for silence.

"Hear then the Council's decision:

"The gladiators and the singers have been adjudged a disturbing note in the life of the cities. This disturbance must be removed. Those of you who think you might learn another duty and live as the rest of the people live by obeying unquestioningly whatever commands are given you will be given an opportunity to do so. Let those cross the room and take a place beside the councillors.

"Those of you whose rebellious spirit is too strong, who cannot work in concord with the rest, whose primitive instincts and emotions will continue to rule them—for them is decreed death. They shall be put through the airlock outside the Dome, where none has gone in forty generations, to die in the poisonous atmosphere. Let these place themselves behind Tedor Kaj. The Council has spoken."

Tedor laughed long and harshly, his voice ringing down the great hall and corridors.

"Choice?" he cried. "Two forms of death! We could resist, councillor. Our swords could slice some of you sheep-people into bits before your long-hidden weapons blasted!"

Flori laid her hand gently on his arm. "To what end, Tedor? Why should we harm people whose only fault was in being fit for the tasks to which they were assigned?"

She faced the councillor. "This is my choice," she said, placing her hand in Tedor's.

Broni Leda limped swiftly to her side. "You are wise, my sister! At least we shall see the sky!"

"By the sword of Lerri," Roh Tili shouted, "he's right!" And he strode to where the singers were grouped; grasped a pretty, red-haired one by the waist and gave her a smacking kiss.

"I've been wanting to do that for a year, Lona!" he grinned, "but I wasn't even supposed to look at you except over the telion." He gazed into her eyes, his voice suddenly tender. "I'm going out to the biggest adventure of all, Lona. I'm going to look at the sky, perhaps see the sun in the few moments we may live outside. Would you—would—" and Roh, who had fought a Blue-cap with bare fists and killed him, blushed.

Lona looked at him and quirked up a corner of her mouth in a semi-smile.

"I've been wanting you to do that for a year," she said. "I don't care about the sun so much, but I know I'd rather be dead than live the way the Council has decreed. Yes, Roh Tili, I'll go look at the sky with you."

THE hall was strangely still, the assemblage watching this little tableaux between singer and gladiator with the fascination a great crisis sometimes can evoke. The councillors looked on, a little contemptuous, a bit puzzled, and, as Tedor suspected, perhaps a bit enviously, albeit retaining the mask of chill aloofness.

Then slowly the entire company, gladiators and singers both, moved over and took places behind Tedor Kaj, Flori and Broni Leda.

The city was told the news over the telions. No more games. No more singers. The people accepted passively. The Council knew best. Meanwhile there were wheels to run, valves to watch and they went about their duties with a flicker of dull wonder, perhaps, as to what manner of creatures the singers and gladiators could be to act as they had.

Tedor Kaj and his comrades were as excited as cadets preparing for their first games. Quickly they donned battle attire, green tunics, leather jerkins, soft boots, swords, rope and bows and arrows. The singers put on their gayest robes to greet the sun.

The massive inner gates of the airlock swung open, slowly and gratingly. A gang of workmen had toiled hours to loosen the mightly fastenings and to prepare the gate mechanisms, idle for hundreds of years.

The First Councillor stood before Tedor.

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"You should have been born in the olden days," the councillor said in his whispering monotone, then motioned Tedor to lead his followers into the big lock-room.

A curious exaltation gripped the leaders of the First Twelve. He saw it reflected in the faces of his men and the singers as he turned to motion them onward through the last door between them and a tortured and lifeless world where no living thing had moved for thousands of years.

Tedor felt no twinge of regret at leaving the drabness of East City behind.

As for dying, surely his place in the Abode of Warriors awaited! He turned back once again and lifted his voice in a mighty shout:

"We go, comrades," he called. "We go to see the sun!"

Flori's hand in his, Tedor watched the inner doors swing shut, leaving the silent throng in oppressive darkness. On the other side the First Councillor's face bore a strange look. Centuries in the past it would have been called a look of pain, for his synthetically fed heart was not functioning just right. He shook his head in what could be termed an angry gesture.

These primitives! Could their ancient emotions have contaminated him?

IN THE lock, Flori grasped Tedor's hand.

"How long will we have to wait?" she whispered.

"Not long. A few moments. The gas, last time they reported it, was more deadly than it ever had been—there go the outer gates!"

A long sigh went up from the waiting victims. Rumbling and groaning from long disuse, the valve gates slowly opened and a shaft of brilliance stabbed into their eyes, blinding them. It was the sun! A murmur of joy swept out the rapidly widening gates.

"Let us hurry out!" Roh Tili shouted. "Make the most of the time!"

Dragging Lona, he pushed his great frame through the gates and immediately looked upward. Slowly, then rushing even faster, gusts of warm, odorous air blew into the lock-room.

Tedor's throat contracted. "This it is," he thought. It was distinctly different from the air within the Domes. He wondered how long it would be before the deadly fumes took effect.

He gestured to Flori to hold her breath so long as possible. They helped Broni outside and stood gazing at the great core of light they knew as the legendary sun, but only for a few seconds at a time, for their eyes were accustomed to the cold, bluish light of the Domes. This light was yellow-white and hot.

"I can't see," Broni said, rubbing his eyes, which had begun to water and smart.

"I came out here to see the sun," Roh Tili moaned, "and I can't see anything but the inside of my own eyelids. Well, farewell, Lona and comrades, I can smell the gas. It is sweet."

The curious odor had become stronger as they stepped away from the now closed gates of the airlock. Tedor finally exhaled a great gust and as he inhaled his nostrils twitched. The gas had a tangy smell, not generally associated with death, but hardly had he drawn a breath or two before he began to get dizzy.

Yet it wasn't unpleasant. He drew Flori to him and they stood awaiting their deaths.

"Afraid?" he whispered.

"Not with you," Flori said.

On all sides, some seated, some standing, the gladiators and singers, most of them fingering their smarting eyes, all of them temporarily blinded by the powerful sun's rays, awaited the doom decreed for them.

Suddenly the stillness was broken by a peculiar singing, whistling noise almost directly overhead. It swooped and darted above them.

Narrowing his eyelids to tiny slits, Tedor peered upward. He was becoming surprised at the length of time the gas took to work. Aside from the warmth and brightness and peculiar odor, there was not much

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difference between the air outside and inside the Dome.

He could see a little by keeping his eyes shaded. He had a vague impression of a vast blue dome covering him, immeasurably larger than the one he knew. He became giddy again and he closed his eyes.

SLOWLY, as his perceptions, dulled by thought of impending death, came alive again, he sensed a feeling of movements around him not caused by his companions, movements accompanied by rustlings and strange sounds.

The stillness was blasted by a mighty yell from Broni Leda, who at last had been able to conquer the blindness affecting his eyes.

"Look! Smell! Listen!"

Cautiously, the others began to open their eyes, to breathe more deeply.

"A dead world!" Broni shouted again, then laughed exultantly.

Tedor's eyes opened wide. Dead world? Dimly he could see trees, larger and greener than those in the Third Dome. He gazed quickly downward—grass! Thick, waving in the breeze! Curiously, he could not remember walking into it.

Incredulous murmurs, swelling into glorious laughter and happy shouts, came from the men and women scattered about. Flori threw her arms around Tedor.

"The poison gas! Where is it? Why didn't we die?" she cried hysterically, between laughter and tears of happiness.

"Die?" Tedor muttered. Then he laughed. "We've been entombed and didn't know it. For three thousand years people have lived in those giant graves. More than two thousand years ago they took the last test of this atmosphere. Meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile nature has been at work," Broni Leda said, breaking in excitedly. "No sooner had men shut themselves up in domes than the old atmospheric balance began to come back before all animal and plant life became extinct."

Broni paused to gain breath.

"It took long years," he continued. "Probably some parts of the world still are tainted with the poisonous gas, but the patches of life that were left have begun to reclaim the rest of the earth and the normal air."

"Oh, Broni," Flori broke in, "you'd rationalize anywhere. You belong back in the science chambers." She laughed and kissed him, taking the sting out of her words.

Gladiators and singers ran about like children, tripping over rocks, rolling in the grass. Roh Tili was swinging from a tree branch.

"You've really gone primitive," Jon Nara hooted at him.

A little furry head poked around a tree and chittered. Flori pointed it out to Tedor.

"Why," he said wonderingly, "it's an animal."

Broni looked thoughtfully at the sky and then at the gigantic gray Dome towering a short distance away.

"You know," he said, "I wonder if the First Councillor may have realized what had happened out here. I have thought it queer he didn't order us to the gas chambers."

Tedor Kaj was not listening, however. A new feeling of triumph and power had come over him. He knelt and scooped up a handful of grass and rich brown earth.

The blindness had almost passed. He could see well now. He could see mile on mile of green forest from the high ground on which the First Dome was built. In the distance a blue lake glittered and far away mountains raised white-capped heads into the clouds.

Behind him were the great Domes. He dismissed thoughts of them with a shudder. They were houses of the dead.

Man had come back to earth.

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(Continued from page 13)

when you were still a squalling baby. In the future, put the soft pedal on such yearns. It is getting so every time you open a SF magazine you come upon a story which is a variation of that plot.

"The Earth Saver" was what brought my good humor back and caused me to write only those mild chiding remarks for the above stories. In spite of the old "Martians invade Earth" plot, the humorous twist was a sort of relief from the dreary conformist attitude of the other stories.

As a final dig, before I stop to read the lead novel, I will say that those three stories were the best balanced group of literature that I have thus seen in STARTLING STORIES.

Could you sneak in somewhere in your magazine a review of current Science Fiction and Fantasy publications and movies? I think it would stimulate a livelier interest in this field.

Going back to the cover, it is one of the best I have seen gracing the front of this magazine. For quite a while I thought that big green thing dominating most of the illustrations was the cloud. I had to study it thoroughly to recognize it as our moon. What is it, the other side? I can see none of the usual formations. The Space Ship looked vaguely like a reprint from one of Buck Rogers' earlier models, and for that reason I am soured toward it.

Do you realize that that is the second Space Ship you have printed in a year? You're getting in a rut! However, at least it is not another one of those @¢*%$#&$% Bug-Eyed Monsters, the despair and frustration in every science-fiction fan's life—**30 Amherst Avenue, Swarthmore, Pa.**

I'll refer your suggestion about a review department to Alex Samalman, who spasmodically reviews scientific books and such. You don't think the old Sarge is going to add that chore to his present task of sweeping out the offices and wading through these ethergrams, do you? I gotta have five minutes for lunch, y'know. Yes, I left out about a page of your letter because it was typed on the back of your first sheet, and the old Sarge wasn't going to waste time having it re-typed for the printer. But I'll answer one question you asked. The Science Question Box has been temporarily discontinued, and the poor old Sarge will now answer a reasonable number of scientific inquiries in this department.

The current rocket fuel seems to be U-235 in fiction. In practical experiments it is any explosive which will give the greatest thrust forward in ratio to volume and weight. The 200-inch mirror is being housed right now in its cradle at Mount Palomar, California, and is already in use, although the observatory and auxiliary equipment are not fully completed and assembled.

The rest of your questions can go hang for the present. And it's Mister Mud Slinger to you!

PINCH-HITTING FOR VIC KING

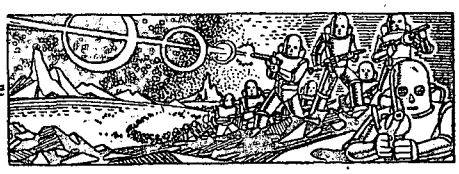
By James Johnson

The man with the whiskers has taken Vic in tow for the duration, so henceforth I shall be the perpetrator of reportings from this neck of the plains.

First, the cover — Boy! Some spaceships! Or could it be that the artist has a bum sense of perspective? Oh, well, at least no BEMS and half-nekkid wimmen.

Morey rides heads above the muck with the only two acceptable interior pix—"Earth

(Continued on page 118)



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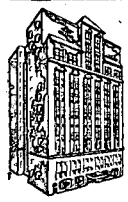

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THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 116)

Saver" and "Ancient Brain." Perhaps there is some justification for keeping the lad about.

The novel was passing fair. The science seems dubious to me, but I can't prove anything.

"The Earth-Saver" was the only good story in the issue. Sheer farce—but I liked it. Comedy of this sort is all right if it is not used to excess.

"The Ancient Brain" was merely a vehicle to convey the author's ideas on the world of tomorrow. In itself, the story was mediocre. If the Hall of Fame shorts you have been running are submitted as a sample of the good old days, I'll take vanilla.

"Death Ray": How in Cthulthu's name can you **do** this to us? It reads like one of these short-shorts that appear in comic magazines.

"The Ether Vibrates": It amuses me the way these guys are jumping on the bandwagon. In your answer to Vic's letter, you say that stf is fantastic. True. But is fantasy scientific?

Glad to see the question department gone. Is it permanent?—**P. O. Box 1322, Aberdeen, South Dakota.**

In the first place, fresh, those things on the cover are pencils prodding a gooseberry with the black rot. And the Hall of Fame shorts we've been reprinting for four years are certainly fair samples of science-fiction of the early days, and if you haven't yet found one that pleases you, you *have* to take vanilla.

Thanks for writing, and send the old Sarge's regards to Vic—and all other fans now in service.

'RAY FOR BROWN AND EBEY

By Earl Cottengim

In the Nov. issue of SS there are two letters that I believe express the thoughts of all real stf fans. They were written by A. R. Brown and George Ebey. As for the rest, some are good, some fair, and quite a few are terrible. "Two Worlds to Save" was dryer than a Martian desert and it had a big hole, namely the tapping language of the turtles. It's impossible.

"The Day of the Cloud" was the first good novel since about the May, 1941, issue, except maybe "Blood on the Sun." "The Ancient Brain" was very good, "The Earth Saver" was good, and "Death Ray" was fair.

The cover is the best I ever saw on SS, and I have been reading SS about 2½ years (stf about three years). The coloration of the planets and the space ship design could be improved, but it is still a vast improvement over your usual covers.

As for departments, your present line runs from fair to bad. I, personally, would like an article, or even a series of articles, on the prophecies of Michel Nostradamus who seems to have had some pretty accurate inside dope on the future—**Box 167, London, Ky.**

You all the time want something we don't have, Joe. Stuff from Nostradamus does not belong, logically, in the sober halls of science. Wait a minute, Junior, don't throw that wrench! I didn't say the good Dr. Nostradamus was not a scientist. I just mean that we don't have enough data on his scientific attainments to make him a lodge member of this group. He's got to stick with the crystal-gazers, sooth-sayers and owls, with maybe a black cat for garnishment on Halloween. Anyway, he was a good physician, and they do say his predictions hit the nail on the head frequently!

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SLIGHTLY MIXED BUT STRONG

By Gene Hunter

Although I am an avid hater of the alleged "Good' Old Dazers," I couldn't fight off the wave of nostalgia that swept over me when I reached up and pulled the Nov. STARTLING STORIES off the stand. After these many months — an interplanetary cover! Some of my enthusiasm was dampened by the fact that the space ships were much, yea, **very** much too large in proportion to the moon. Even so, this is the best Bergey I've ever seen, which in turn means it was the year's best.

Rocklynne's novel was good, and takes second place in this year's lineup. Jarvis' "Blood On the Sun" was the year's best yarn.

"The Earth Saver" takes second spot in the issue. "The Ancient Brain" was only fair, and the less said about "Death Ray" the better.

Now, on to "The Reader Speaks."

Paul Carter! I'm actually ashamed of you! From your letter it would seem that you now consider yourself an **important** fan who shuns alphabetical societies. Well, Paul, you must have become very **important** to fandom since the April STARTLING STORIES, for in both the February and April issues, you formed societies. (1) the SFTAOPCWFIROTFSFM, or the Society for the Abolishment of Pulp Covers with Females in Red on Them from S-F Mags, and (2), the utterly silly SFTPOCOSFP—Society for the Prevention of Covers on Science-Fiction Publications. Ah, ha! But now you shun those societies! Request—Will someone please define the phrase **important fan?**

I'll agree with you that most societies are absolutely mad attempts by the fans, to have their names in print. Of course there are a few notable exceptions, like the anti-BEM society, its rival the pro-BEM societies, and my own SISFPITE—Society for the Improvement of Science-Fiction Publications by the Introduction of Trimmed Edges. However, the SISFPITE is far from silly, and is only an attempt to stir up discontent among the fans, and have them do something about those terrible ragged edges which most mags insist upon. (My, my, don't all the editors hate me, though.)

And what, my dear Carter, could be more utterly mad than to rate stories and pics with —of all things—Xeno?!! And the Sarge even

[*Turn page*]

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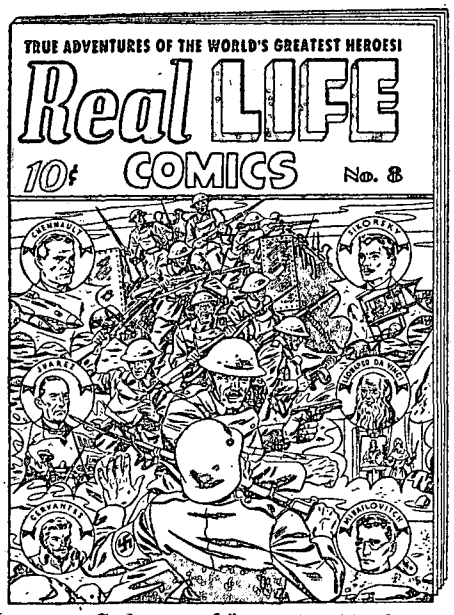

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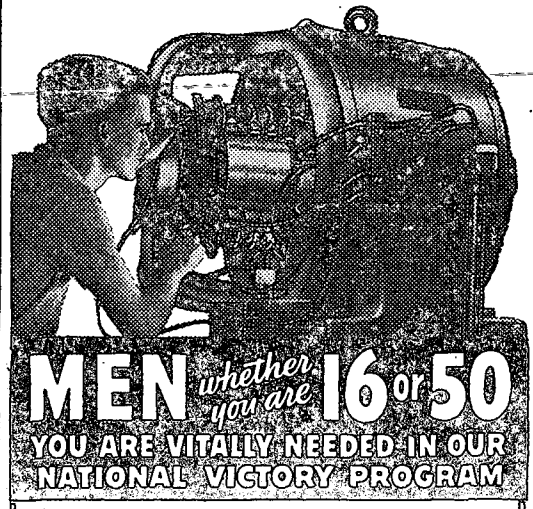

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upholds this system. Sergeant's pet—yahhhh! In closing, may I state that I think the editors should boil Sarge Saturn in his own Xeno, and they might give Paul Carter a slight scorching while about it—**616 E. McCarty Ave., Jefferson City, Mo.**

Now if the old Sarge was a fellow to drive a knife in the chinks of an unwary kiwi's armor, you'd be a dead duck, Pee-lot Hunter. But the chief astrogator won't polish you off. I'll just let you down gently.

In the main your ethergram is fair medicine, but may I point out dryly that the name of this department is THE ETHER VIBRATES, not THE READER SPEAKS? And who is this Jarvis guy who wrote your version of BLOOD ON THE SUN? Hal K. Wells wrote the story for us.

Okay, your face is red, but I know you read STARTLING STORIES, so skip it.

REAL SCIENCE COVER

By Leroy E. Beeson

I didn't think I would ever live to see a real science cover on one of your mags again. Seriously speaking, that cover on the November issue of STARTLING STORIES was the best you have had for two years. I'm willing to bet you receive many letters praising it and I hope you do because it might open your eyes to the fact that we fans have been asking, begging, and pleading for all these years, for real science covers rather than one portraying a couple of humans or a grotesque monster that only mar your covers. If Bergey could do that well all the time he would be my favorite.

Many, many fans have asked and asked you to get rid of Belarski. It's beyond me why you don't. I'd be also willing to bet that if you would use Finlay and Paul on your covers quite often your circulation would increase and you would have more contented readers. Why, look at the masterpieces Paul used to do for you around '30; they are some of the best I have ever seen

It is my claim that a story is only as good as its picture. If a story I read has a good drawing accompanying it, it greatly improves my opinion of that story. Thus I ask you why don't you get rid of some of these artists that draw for you and get Finlay and Paul to do most of your work? I see you are using Finlay more often in T.W.S., which is good.

PLEASE, Sarge, USE ONLY PAUL FOR YOUR HALL OF FAME CLASSICS. Your last four Hall of Fame stories have had Morey. I regard Morey as your worst artist and it really disillusioned my reading the stories when I saw his pictures. I think those Hall of Fame stories are the best in each issue.

Never discontinue your Thrills In Science department. It is what makes your magazine different from all the rest.

For future use in your Hall of Fame I think "Seeds From Space," by Lawrence Manning or "Day of the Beast," by D. D. Sharp sound like good ones. I have never read either one and they both sound good. It will be a black day in my life when you start reprinting stories I have read.

You have been publishing S. S. for two years now. During that time you have had many good stories. Following is a list of the ones I think are best, starting with the cover.

Best cover: I can't decide whether the Jan., March, May '39 or the Nov. '42 is the best. These were all great covers because they combined science with something interesting to look at. Please, oh, please have more like them.

Best novel: "The Impossible World" by Eando Binder. It was this story that made me decide to be a regular scientifiction fan. Something about the story made me visualize the immensity of space. Tied very closely for second place is Stanley G. Weinbaum's "The Black Flame" and Hamilton's "The Prisoner of Mars." I wish you could get stories like these again.

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Best short story: "Cosmic Stage" by Robert Arthur, Sept. '39. This was a little gem of a story that I believe was really a classic and should be in your Hall of Fame about 1950. Second comes "The Life Battery" by Binder, "Robot A I" by Friend (both July '39), and Robert Arthur's "Eternal Moment" (March '41). All were great stories.

Best Hall of Fame story: "Death From the Stars" by A. Rowley Hilliard. I think this is the greatest story you ever published. Glad to see he's coming up next issue. Close behind is Weinbaum's "Martian Odyssey," Manning and Pratt's "City of the Living Dead," Jones' "Man Beast of Toree," Sharp's "Eternal Man" and almost all of the ones you've published. The only Hall of Fame "dud" ever published was Coblenz's "Making of Misty Isle." I was thoroughly disgusted to see it nominated.

Your feature, "They Changed the World," was good. Why did you discontinue it? All your Thrills in Science features are good.

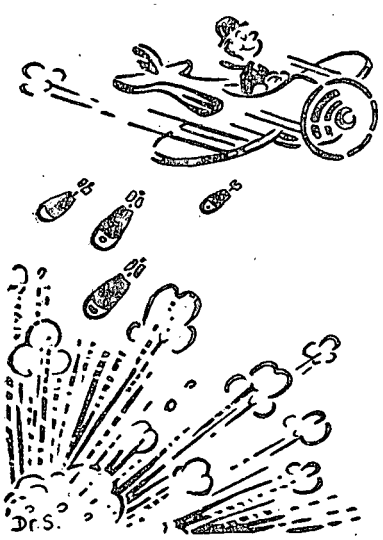
Best art work: Finlay's pics for "The Impossible World," Paul's for "City of Singing Flame" and "City of Living Dead," or Marchoni's for "Death From the Stars." Why doesn't he draw like he used to?

I might add your mag is my favorite because of the long stories and the Hall of Fame selections which I would never have read otherwise — **808 W. 23rd St., Spokane, Washington.**

Not a bad letter, Kiwi Beeson, but I'll have to pin your long ears back on one statement you made. We've been publishing STARTLING STORIES since January, 1939, and with this present issue it starts on its *fifth* year. What do you do, sleep half the time? Never mind, all is forgiven. But you pee-lots should be as sure of your facts as you expect our authors and artists and the old Sarge to be.

Seriously, the old space dog is glad you little beasts like the November cover. Mention this to me again when writing in, and I'll see what I can do to get another such cover soon.

[*Turn page*]



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CALLING ALL SERVICE MEN
By Theresa and Mary Haussmann

We have an assortment of science-fiction magazines in good condition which we would like to donate to men in the service. We were wondering if you could furnish us with the names of such men as have requested them. We also would like to tell you how much we enjoy reading your stf magazines. We eagerly await their publication — **3329 Palisade Ave., Union City, N. J.**

A swell letter, a mighty fine gesture—and a pair of gal readers! What a bouquet for the old Sarge to get all in one ether flash. No foolin', folks, a letter like this compensates for three issues of ravings from discontented kiwis. I suggest that you donate your mags to your local USO committee or to a branch of the Books for Soldiers drive. Maybe your local library can advise you how to dispose of them. I'm sorry, but the old Sarge hasn't any file of addresses on hand. I'll bet any army camp or post would be tickled pink to get a treasure trove like this. And thanks for even mentioning it.

FIRST APPEARANCE
By C. Franklin Derry

As you have never had the pleasure of reading my copy before I will introduce myself. As my name is at the top of this letter we will skip that. I have been reading SF for about six or seven years now and also I have read every issue of STARTLING STORIES, so I think I am in a position to criticize and praise a little, so here goes:

First, your last issue, Nov. 1942, or Vol. 8, No. 3. The lead story was, I see in looking through my files, Rocklynne's first contribution to S.S. Why I don't know, because he is A-1 (as well as 1-A, I suppose?) "The Day of the Cloud" ranks high on my list of S.S.'s ten best stories. Ross made his characters live and breathe and his atmosphere was enough in itself to promote a profound sense of suspense.

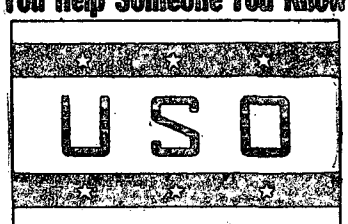
Even though I liked the story I thought that the character of "Harry Porter" was overdone; he was the only one that didn't seem real to me, but still I thought it was a grand story. All in all, the story was up to S.S. standard—and then some!!

I said before that I read every issue of S.S. (twenty-four to date) and picking the ten best is next to impossible, but here goes:

(1) A Million Years to Conquer—Kuttner.
(2) Giants From Eternity—Wellman.
(3) Five Steps to Tomorrow—Binder.
(4) The Gods Hate Kansas—Millard.
(5) The Day of the Cloud—Rocklynne.
(6) City of Glass—Loomis.
(7) The Fortress of Utopia—Williamson.
(8) Tarnished Utopia—Jameson.
(9) The Water World—Friend.
(10) A Yank at Valhalla—Hamilton.

Aside from my ten best I would like to see more Binder, Williamson, Wells (Hal. K.), Hamilton, Loomis, and Wellman (but no more like "Devil's Planet"). Oh, yes, don't forget

You Help Someone You Know



When You Give to the U S O

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Kuttner. In addition I would like to see that old team of Laurence Manning and Fletcher Pratt, and Otis Adelbert Kline, Arthur K. Barnes, Arthur J. Burks, Raymond Z. Gallun, Isaac Asimov, Dr. Keller and J. J. Millard. That's a big order I know, but I hope you do it in the months to come.

Miscellaneous: GET PAUL at all costs; he is an artist without a peer. Get the new improved Morey, also SHEENMAN, DOLD, and ROGERS, the latter for covers as well as inside. Don't forget Rogers for your covers!

Bring back the "Guest Editorials" and have the cover illustrate the novel and a little more science in the stories, too, huh!

Well, that's about all except for a little well-deserved credit to you, such as:

I have never read a story in S.S. that I didn't like, and on the whole the magazine is just what SF needs, so keep the novels long, the longer the better. Even if you have to increase the price, you know the fans will buy it just the same. For it's quality that counts and you know that in SF quantity begets quality, for an author can write a better story if he has room to develop the plot.

Glad to see R. M. Williams coming back next issue as I liked his "Bridge to Earth." Hope "World Beyond the Sky" is as good—
Lanham, Md.

For a first watch in the astrogation chamber, Pee-lot Derry, you shoot a mean space sextant. We'll do our best for you in the months ahead. And I'll assure you that you're going to like THE WORLD BEYOND THE SKY in this issue—if, you haven't already read it by the time you reach this department. And please note, all you howling hyenas of space, that the cover illustrates this story graphically.

Yeah, I know—there's a thousand technical things wrong with it—as usual. Pass me the aspiring, Wart-ears.

[*Turn page*]

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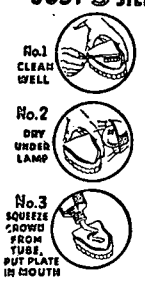

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No, never mind! Look what I just fished off the ethergram spindle!

IT'S BROTHER WHO PAYS
By Lee Kessler

Have you room on your space-skipping-go-wagon for a "femme"? I'd like to ride along, and I've bought the very latest in space togs to make a proper impression. I promise not to jinx anything.

I haven't been reading science-fiction very long. I came home for a visit a year ago and found my brother reading your magazines. Went through a few copies myself and then got a job here and stayed so I can read all he buys. I like 'em! Space travel, time jaunts and dimension jumps certainly give the old imagination something new to sink its teeth into. I read all the stories, but I confess to a preference for the ones that don't go in for monstrous forms of humanity that look like products of Xeno-induced DTs.

I also like the correspondence pages—"The Ether Vibrates"! What a name for a department! But how apt! No wonder it vibrates with the howls of some of these space-apes pouring in. They're swell, Sarge, and they sure crack down on you, but I must say they do get their change!

Ray for SS. And come on with that Annual. My brother will buy that, too. What? Why don't **I**? Shhh! He'll hear you — **221 Spring St., Nanticoke, Pa.**

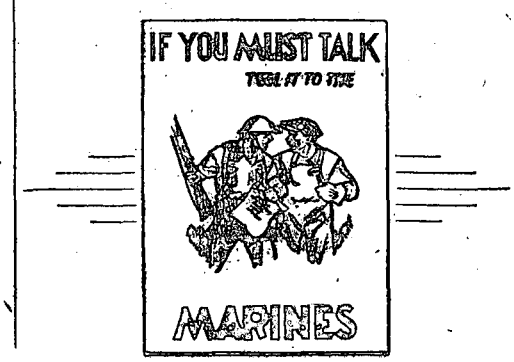
Listen, honey chile, the old Sarge thinks you are smart in two ways—to get Brother to pay for the mags, of course, but mostly for your taste in reading them. Sure, we know this type of fiction isn't Shakespearian, but it's certainly stimulating and thought-provoking. It isn't kid stuff, by a jugful (of Xeno). And the old Sarge is willing to bet all his starboard rockets that Bill Shakespeare would have written science-fiction, too, if his reading public had been educated up to receiving it.

No foolin', what I like is the growing circle of women readers. That is inconvertible proof that science-fiction is solid and sure. And let the space-apes howl and chatter. The old Sarge loves double-talk set to music.

And here we have a nice kick in the pants for a final rocket.

A MISGUIDED SERVICE MAN
By A. C. Johnston

I am only a poor misguided service man that has been reading scientifiction stories for the past five years. At a rate, I might add, of five or six magazines per month. I don't have a beef for STARTLING STORIES. I like it—in fact, I like 'em all. The only reason I am writing in now is this:



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I am disgusted with ethergrams.

For instance (Vol. 8—3) by T. Reagan, Jr.: (Quote) My gosh, what a dream I had after seeing the September cover. (Unquote.) Now what I want to know is, does the little boy buy STARTLING STORIES to read, or just look at the pretty pictures?

And that howl for trimmed edges! Buddy, I was at a place where you couldn't get magazines with any kind of edges. The war! Priorities! Remember? So I say be thankful for the magazine as is.

I'd better knock off here before I start another wave of some kind. But personally I think STARTLING STORIES is a very good magazine, full of good stories by good pen pushers—**Navy Pier, Chicago, Ill.**

Well! And once again—well! How do you space monkeys like that for a parting salute. Yeah, the old Sarge fooled you that time. A kick in the pants, he says. But he neglected to say whose pants, didn't he?

Zipper up your space suit, Junior, before you catch cold.

And that's that for this issue. Batten down the hatches, seal the air-locks, and you kiwis can take over for the rest of the trip. Don't run us into a spatial ditch, and, above all, don't chase and bark at any meteor swarms. Pass the old astrogator a fresh Xeno jug, Frog-eyes.

—SERGEANT SATURN.

P.S.: Kiwis, when you help America to win the war you're helping to create the kind of a FUTURE you want the world to have! Keep right on buying those War Bonds and Stamps! And—here's another tip. Listen to "The Army Hour," official program of the War Department, Sunday afternoons from 3:30 to 4:30 P.M., Eastern War Time, for many suggestions that will help you do your bit for America's war effort.

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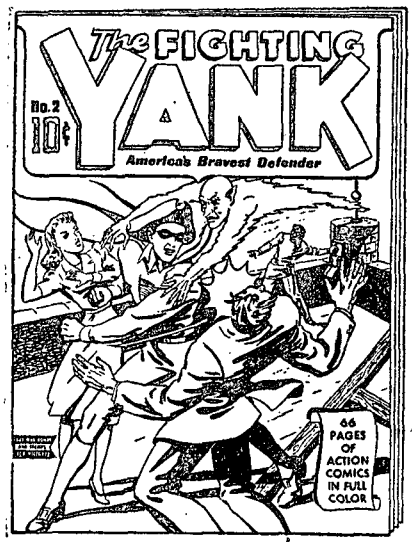

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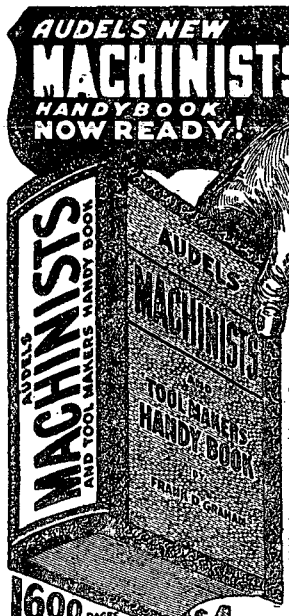

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REVIEW OF THE SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS

By

SERGEANT SATURN

OH, my head! Pass the Xeno jug and a fresh bottle of aspirin, Short-wave. It's time to exhume the new crop of fanzines. Yeah, I call my dopey assistant, known to you birds as Frog-eyes and Wart-ears, Short-wave because it's so hard to drag him out of the ether at times.

Never mind the shouts of "Corn" from the second gallery; I'm going to exhibit for you a bumper crop of that stuff immediately after this overture. Pretty good corn, too, judging the first item I pick up.

Whoa! Cut your rocket blasts, Sarge; you're getting a bit ahead of yourself. This is no fanzine. It is a brochure on meteorites by Dr. H. H. Nininger.

Let's have a closer look, gang.

A COMET STRIKES THE EARTH, American Meteorite Laboratory, 635 Fillmore Street, Denver, Colo. Price 35c, 3 for $1.00. Postpaid.

A pocket-sized booklet of twenty pages within a nice blue jacket and a striking cut-away cylindrical spot in which is mounted a genuine fragment of meteoric rock. The contents matter of great interest, and numerous photographs of meteors and such. Decidedly a worthwhile and unique investment, kiwis.

FANTAST, Idlewild, Fountainhall Road, Aberdeen, Scotland. Editor, Douglas Webster. 6d. per copy; 1/6 for three.

I don't know whether this is a new name for FANTASY, published by Douglas Webster, or another mag. Anyway, it's 36 pages of stuff and such with a nice pale blue cover with a July, 1942, date line and the shaded line-drawing of a file of robotish figures with bowed heads passing in review below a huge mounted star-toothed gear. (Suggested title: "Will there be any stars on my crown?")

Plenty of drawings and headings and lots of articles. And a bird of a gal on page 4. Yeah—pouter pigeon. Okay, Doug.

FANTASY FICTION FIELD, 1702 Dahill Road, Brooklyn, N. Y. Editor, Julius Unger. Weekly. 5c per copy.

The old Sarge has reviewed this little weekly several times. It still seems to be going strong and continues the cute idea of including a glossy print of the cover of the next pseudo-science magazine on newsstand sale. Nice work, Julius.

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NEBULA, 333 Belgrade, Phila., Pa. Editor, Rusty Barron. Weekly. 5c per copy; 24 issues for $1.

Pass the aspirin, Wart-ears. We've spouted about this one before, too. No new features to rave over, but NEBULA holds its own. Keep plugging, Rusty; you'll wear smooth in time.

PARADOX, 3 Lewis St., Westfield, Mass. Editor, Frank Wilimczyk, Jr. Quarterly. 10c per copy; three for 25c.

Ah! Sixteen pages of standard white between yellow covers. Good drawings, headings, contents page. Includes fiction and articles and such. Smooth rocketing, kiwi. Whom are you "panning" on the front cover with that drawing? Do you mean that the poor editor is a goat?

POCORUS, 628 W. 15th St., San Pedro, Calif. Editors, Pogo and Rus Wood. Published when and if. 10c per copy. Exchanges welcome.

Well, well, blast my rockets! This is a new baby. 19 pages, folded to half size to give us 38 pages of fanzine copy. Mostly in blurry purple imprint on white. Otherwise, nice format, neat contents page, and several illustrations. Wow! Who designed the cutie on pages 26 and 27? I'll bet she experiences a cold winter, what with the fuel shortage. (No, Junior, the pages are not numbered, so you needn't start thumbing your feverish way through the magazine.) Clean up your mimeograph work, boys, and you'll come along nicely.

SHANGRI-L'AFFAIRES, 1055 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, Calif. Editor, Arthur Louis Joquel, II. (No price listed.) Published, when and if.

I have the sneaking suspicion we've scanned this number herein before, too. However, here we go again, boys, and never mind the hats. Foolscap size (they do things in a big way in California), an occasional illustration and a joke or two as footnotes to the page. Mostly news of California doings. Good stuff to keep Florida wised up.

SPACE TALES, 2310 Virginia, Everett, Wash. Editor, Tom Ludowitz. Published bi-monthly. Price 5c per copy; 6 issues for 25c.

Frankly, the old Sarge doesn't remember what if anything he said in the past about this number. And judging from the head portrait of Frankenstein, Jr., as the cover illustration, I won't be saying much against it. I want to sleep tonight. Twenty-four pages (including said cover) of standard white paper with black type and black line drawings. Nice looking contents page and intriguing—inviting. It seems that the old space dog recognizes a couple of names on the contents page, too. How you kiwis do get around. Nice ish.

SPACEWAYS, 303 Bryan Place, Hagerstown, Md. Editor, Harry Warner, Jr. Published eight times yearly. Price 10c per copy; 3 for 25c.

Twenty-two pages of neatly arranged this and that between yellow covers. Cover illustration—microscope. (Now, who thought up that?) Back cover—boy taking Christmas toys apart. Nice and neat contents page—articles, humor, verse and features. Looks good, Harry.

And, while we are at it, we might as well comment on following issue (Vol. 4, No. 7).

[*Turn page*]

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STARLIT FANTASY, 3025 Ainslie St., Chicago, Ill. Editor, Harry Schmarjo. Published bi-monthly. Price 10c; 3 for 25c—80c per year.

Note: The old sarge will vote for three issues at a time. Eighty cents per year strikes *me as asking for a 30c premium.* But you kiwis figure it out. 28 pages of stuff and stuff on standard white paper with black ink between covers of same style. Oh, shivering ghouls of Gonna-Gonna. The four characters in robes of sable night on the cover would addle an egg of a cockatrice. Good Halloween motif. Nice contents page, headings and contents. A good fanzine.

VOM, Box 6475 Met. Stn., Los Angeles, Calif. Editors, Forrest Jackerman and Morojo Squirt. Published if and when. Price 10c per copy.

Well, you boys and girls know about VOM. You've read of it here in these columns, if nowhere else. The old sarge thinks this August, 1942, issue is of usual quality—foolscap size, nice clear print, good headings and articles, and perhaps a line drawing or two. But I wouldn't know for sure. I got halted on the cover. Yeah—a gal sitting on a futuristic arrow headed for a celestial target.

Yes, sir, you pee-lots can take the ship on into port. I'm getting out here to visit with the cutie.

All in all, a snappy lot of fanzines this time. I don't need the aspirin this trip, Wart-ears; just get me a fresh jug of Xeno.

And now let the old sarge wish every one of you kiwis, pee-lots and junior astrogators the heartiest possible Christmas and New Year greetings. Carry on, friends, and maybe we can help the entire world celebrate a real joyous Christmas in 1943.

Meanwhile, take your battle stations.

—SERGEANT SATURN.

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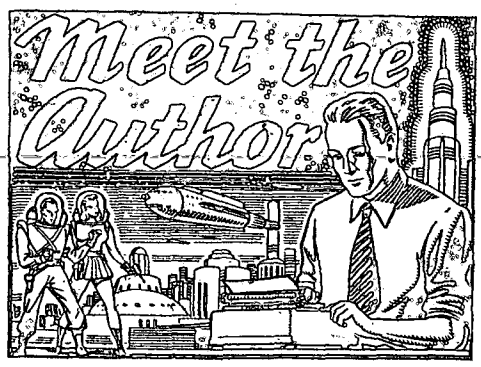

Bob Williams Likes to Read—and Write—Science Fiction

GATHER around the chart table, gang, and meet an old friend and favorite of yours whose first book length novel for STARTLING STORIES appeared in the September, 1939, issue. Let's see how many of you remember.

Robert Moore Williams, author of this issue's complete novel, WORLD BEYOND THE SKY, adds a brief bit to the biographical material we gave you nearly three years

Robert Moore Williams

back. But we'll add this bit first. Bob is a perfectly normal American, average in size and height, with a pleasant disposition, a quiet smile, and he lives in St. Louis, Mo.

About his advent in the field of science fiction, Bob says:

"My first introduction to science fiction—aside from Poe's Prose Tales, which I read at the age of nine or thereabouts—was Merritt's 'The Metal Monster' which appeared sometime back in the twenties. Since then I have been an avid reader of this type of fiction.

"When I started writing, it was quite natural that I should attempt to produce the type of material I most enjoyed reading. Probably because I liked the stuff myself, my first story sold.

"They have been selling regularly ever since, with the result that over a million words have received the editorial nod of acceptance.

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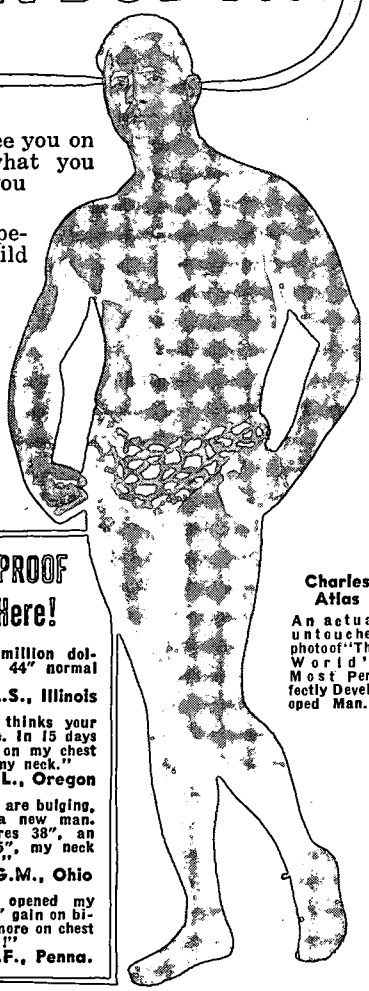

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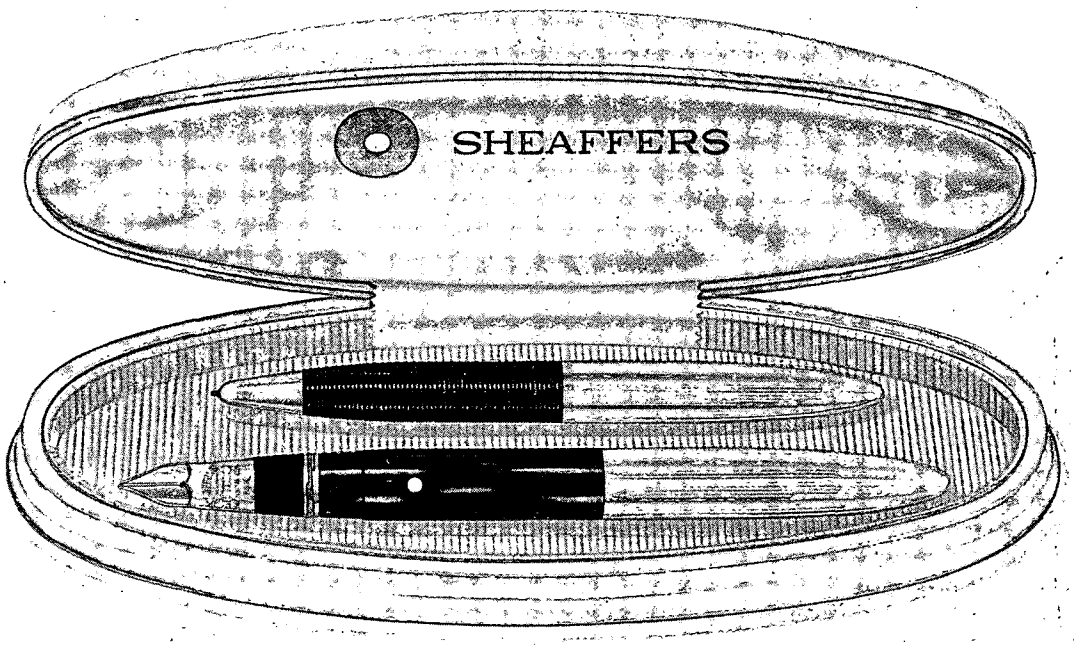

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